

SLAVES AND TYRANTS: DUTCH TRIBULATIONS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MRAUK-U*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the travails of the factors of the Dutch East India Company (or VOC) in the northern Burmese kingdom of Mrauk-U (or Arakan). The Dutch entered into trade in this rather obscure region, at the frontier of South and Southeast Asia, primarily owing to their interest in slaves, to be used in urban and rural settlements under their control in Indonesia. Dutch demand fed into the logic by which the Mrauk-U state from the latter half of the sixteenth century developed a formidable war-fleet, through which raids on the peasantry in eastern Bengal were conducted by Magh captains and Luso-Asian mercenaries, who collaborated with them.

However, the whole commercial relationship was underwritten by a moral and cultural tension. The Dutch factors in their writings analysed here, insisted that the Mrauk-U kings were “tyrants,” citing their slave trade as a key sign; a particular target for their attacks was the ruler Thado Mintara (r. 1645–52). Yet the Dutch too were complicit in the very same slave trade, and were perhaps even aware of their own “bad faith.” For their part, the rulers of Mrauk-U regarded the Dutch with suspicion, while criticising their hypocrisy and double-dealing. Such tensions, negotiated through the 1630s and a part of the 1640s, eventually led the Dutch to withdraw from the trade, and then to re-establish tenuous contacts with some difficulty in the 1650s. The paper thus explores both the history of a form of hostile trade, and the process of the creation of mutual stereotypes, that went with the nature of commercial relations.

Introduction

Of the littoral regions of the Bay of Bengal, the coast of Arakan, stretching some six hundred kilometres from the eastern fringes of Bengal to the Burma delta, has probably posed the greatest problems to the historian of the early modern period on account of its obscurity.¹ To be sure, thanks to the work of British colonial historians

* I am grateful for comments and suggestions to Sugata Bose, Victor Lieberman, Geoffrey Parker, and Catherine Raymond. Earlier versions were presented at the EHESS in November 1995, and Yale University in December 1995.

¹ For a similar observation, Jacques Leider, “La route de Am (Arakan): Contribution à l'étude d'une route terrestre entre la Birmanie et le Golfe du Bengale,” *Journal Asiatique* 282/2 (1994): 335–70.

and their Burmese counterparts, the basic outlines of the political and dynastic history of the area have been sketched for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After the decline of the great inland centre of Pagan in the late thirteenth century, a new political configuration gradually took shape in the Arakan region. In the early 1430s, we observe the foundation near the Kaladan river of the centre of Mrauk-U, reputedly by a certain Narameikhla, who according to some legendary accounts had returned from a period of exile in Gaur (western Bengal), with the military support of the Bengal Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud (r. 1433-59) and his "Muslim" (or "Rohinga") troops.

The first three-quarters of a century of this new Mrauk-U dynasty's rule are admittedly obscure. Territorial struggles to the west, with the rulers of the Sultanate of Gaur in Bengal, and with the rajas of Tippera, continued during the period of Min Kharī (1434-59) and Ba Saw Phru (1459-82). It was hence left to the ruler Min Ba (or Sabaq Shah) to consolidate the Mrauk-U polity in the 1530s and 1540s, and to build an elaborate system of defences for the town itself; we thus enter into the "high phase" of the dynasty, that lasts through to the long and controversial reign of Sandathudhamma (1652-84).² If, on the one hand, the Mrauk-U dynasty built up its reputation in this phase as a bastion of elevated and pristine Theravada Buddhism (in which relations with Sri Lanka played a role), Islamic influences from the west are also particularly marked in these years. Whether or not Narameikhla really brought back Muslim troops to aid him, it is certain that the spread of Firdausi and Qadiri Sufi practices in the coastal regions of Arakan can be attested from the fifteenth century; the most visible sign of this is the building of numerous symbolic tombs (*badr maqām*) for the legendary Sufi master of Bengal, Pir Badr-i 'Alam, which then served as places of popular worship.³

The centre of the kingdom was the fortified city of Mrauk-U, located (as noted on the map) on a branch of the Kaladan river, and nearly a hundred kilometres from the coast. Access to the citadel (both from the coast and from the commercial part of the city, located somewhat downstream) was mediated by a complex web of deep creeks and

² For a summing up, see M. S. Collis and San Shwe Bu, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay: A Study of Coinage and Foreign Relations," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (henceforth *JBRS*) 14/4 (1924): 34-52.

³ Richard C. Temple, "Buddermokan," *JBRS* 14/4 (1924): 1-33; and for a reconsideration, M. Siddiq Khan, "Badr Maqams or the Shrines of Badr-al-Din-Auliya," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 8/1 (1962): 17-46.

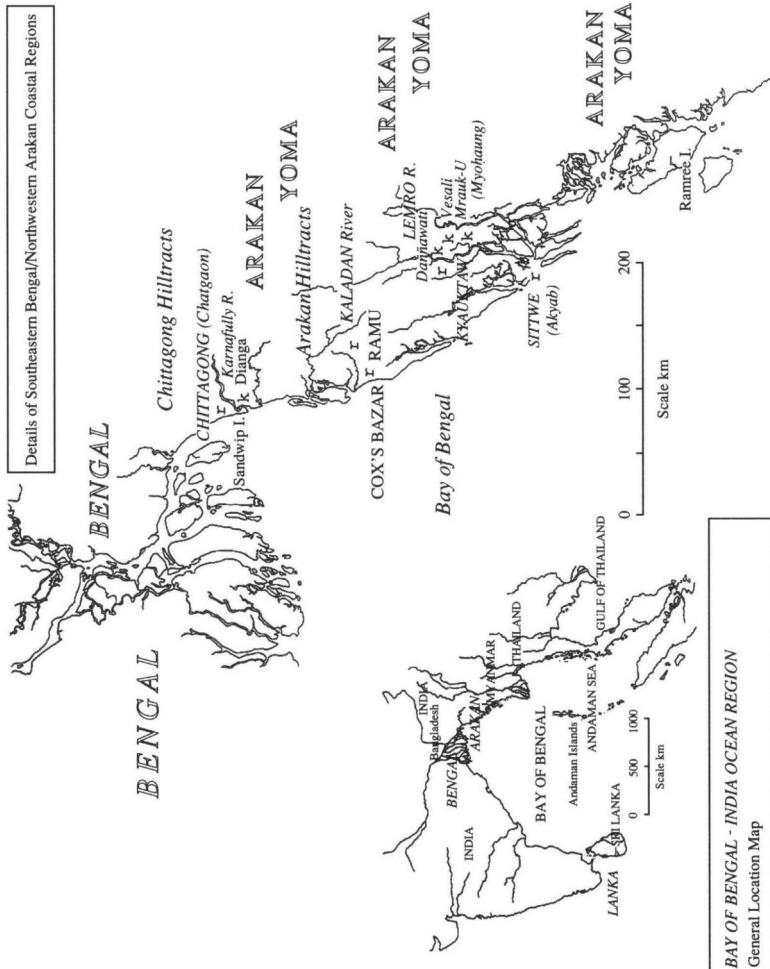
streams that formed a part of the Kaladan fluvial system. With a population estimated at about 150,000 in the mid-seventeenth century, Mrauk-U—the only major urban centre in the kingdom—had numerous canals running through it; the elaborate system of water-management, with reservoirs and channels, also ensured that the flood plains of the Kaladan and Lemro rivers were used to produce rice for local consumption and export. The kingdom's core area was isolated from the rest of Burma (both to the south and east) by the formidable Arakan Yoma range, save for a limited set of passes leading to Pagan and Prome. Geography thus ensured that Mrauk-U could look outwards only overseas, not overland.

What lay behind the “Golden Age” of Mrauk-U inaugurated by Min Ba, to employ the conventional imagery proposed by M. S. Collis?² What sort of polity was this, and how did its structure articulate with the commerce that seems to hold the key to so much in this seemingly “underdeveloped” corner of the Bay? How can we disentangle a region of complex cultural flows and eddies, where the diplomatic correspondence was often conducted in Persian or Portuguese, where the normal language of the court and countryside was Arakanese (Magh), but where a highly sophisticated court-literature was produced in Bengali, and where titulature and some chronicles reflected a late efflorescence of Pali? A palimpsest of influences, Arakan nevertheless retained something of a special character, a character of “in-betweenness” at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, and hence also of marginality from the perspectives of both Indo-Persian and European writers.

Recent years have seen a minor revival of interest among historians of Burma in Mrauk-U’s history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³ There has also been a growing interest in the Portuguese role in Burmese affairs in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, be it in the region’s external trade, in providing mercenaries and fire-power, or (as in the 1640s) in vainly promoting the claims of a Lusitanised pretender to the Arakan throne, Dom Martinho de Alemão, grandson of the Arakan ruler Min Raza Gri or Salim Shah (r. 1593-1612).⁴

² Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760* (Princeton, 1984).

³ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Quisling or Cross-Cultural Broker? Notes on the Life and Worlds of Dom Martinho de Alemão, Prince of Arakan,” *Mare Liberum* 5 (Lisbon, 1993): 77-91; M. Ana Marques Guedes, “D. Martim, um príncipe arracanês ao serviço do Estado da Índia e das pretensões portuguesas de submissão da Birmânia,” *Mare Liberum* 6 (1993): 67-82.



However, by the middle decades of the seventeenth century, Portuguese interest in Arakan, and thus Portuguese sources on the region too, had begun to wear somewhat thin after a late flourish. Still, the 1630s produced the invaluable account of Friar Sebastião Manrique (on which Collis based so much of his reconstruction of Mrauk-U history), even if the text's publication was as late as 1653.⁶ A last flurry of documents from the early 1650s (surrounding the unfortunate Dom Martinho) aside, the reigns of Thado Mintara (1645-52), and his son, Sandathudhamma (1652-84), are somewhat barren from the point of view of the Portuguese archives.⁷

A conspectus of Arakan trade

In the early sixteenth century, the place of Arakan in the Bay of Bengal trade was decidedly limited. During the reign of Min Raza (1501-23), the first Portuguese fleets called on the ports of the region as part of a larger exploration of the Bengal trade. In 1518, the first official fleet, that of D. João da Silveira, arrived in Bengal; Silveira probably put in at Chittagong in early May 1518, where he appears to have had very little commercial success. Curiously, he had already been preceded in 1516-17 by a Portuguese mission under one João Coelho, sent out from Pasai, of which we know very little for certain. While at Chittagong, Silveira was visited by emissaries from Min Raza, who offered him supplies and invited him to visit the ports of Arakan; an earlier visit may already have been paid there (to a centre mysteriously termed *Quylaa*, "fortress") by João Coelho. At any rate, in 1518, Min Raza is reported to have offered Silveira "many goods: ivory and lac and textiles and precious stones." However, on arriving at the mouth of the Kaladan, the Portuguese fleet found that Mrauk-U was located considerably upriver, and hence abandoned the project.⁸ A relic from this early contact is an obscurely phrased and undated Portuguese translation

⁶ M. S. Collis, "Fra Manrique: A Glimpse of Arakan in 1630 A.D.," *JBRIS* 13 (1923): 199-219; also Collis, "The City of Golden Mrauk-U," *JBRIS* 13 (1923): 244-56. For the text, see *Itinerário de Sebastião Manrique*, ed. Luís Silveira, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1946), and the English translation by C. E. Luard and H. Hosten, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique, 1628-1641*, 2 vols. (London, 1927).

⁷ The most comprehensive survey and listing of the Portuguese sources on Burma for the years from 1580 to 1640 (or so) may be found in Maria Ana Marques Guedes, *Interferência e Integração dos Portugueses na Birmânia, c. 1580-1630* (Lisbon, 1994).

⁸ D. João de Lima to D. Manuel, Cochin, 22 December 1518, *Arquivos Nacionais/Torre do Tombo* (henceforth AN/TT), Lisbon, *Corpo Cronológico*, in Geneviève Bouchon and Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et de l'Irrawaddy*:

of a letter from Min Raza to the king of Portugal, Dom Manuel, proposing a relationship of peace and friendship; in this letter, the Arakan ruler interestingly styles himself king of Bengal.⁹ These wishes for amicable relations were soon to be regretted, for two of the ships of Silveira's fleet decided to mutiny and turn to corsair activities in the region.

This inauspicious but, in retrospect, thoroughly appropriate beginning to relations between the Portuguese and Arakan seemed only to confirm that Arakan held little commercial interest for the Europeans. Consider the two standard Portuguese accounts of the early sixteenth century, those of Tomé Pires (1515) and Duarte Barbosa (1518). In the former, written from information gathered at Melaka from local merchants, Arakan finds mention as follows:

The Kingdom of Arracam lies between Bemgala and Peguu. This is a Gentile king who is very powerful in the interior. He has one good seaport, where the Pegus and Bemgalas and Queljjs trade, [but it is] not much frequented (*nom de mujo trato*). The port is called Mayajerij. Near this port, the King has a fortress of adobe, strong amongst them. In the land of Raquam there are many horsemen, and many elephants. There is some silver. There are three or four sorts of cotton cloth in which the residents are dressed. They are textiles for their apparel and garments, and they are to be found there in greater quantity than elsewhere, and people come there for them.¹⁰

As we can see, here the products of Arakan are being extended to include the textiles of eastern Bengal. In a subsequent passage, in which rubies are discussed, Arakan will equally be extended eastwards to embrace the city of Ava.

Barbosa, writing from information gathered in Kerala, and perhaps somewhat better informed, confirms the limited trade of Arakan in his account, while adding rather curious claims concerning the court ritual. He writes:

In the interior of this kingdom of Berma is another kingdom, also of the Gentiles, which does not have any sea-port, it borders on the one side with that of Bengala, and on the other with that of Ava (*d'Aba*), and it is called Aracangil. The king is

Relation Portugaise Anonyme (1521) (Paris, 1988), 359-61; also the discussion by Thomaz, 59-63.

⁹ *Cartas dos Vice-Reis da Índia*, No. 108, AN/TT, in Bouchon and Thomaz, *Voyage*, 362-63.

¹⁰ Armando Cortesão, ed., *A Suma Oriental de Tomé Pires e o Livro de Francisco Rodrigues* (Coimbra, 1978), 227-28. In my earlier essay, "Quisling or Cross-cultural Broker," 79, I have inexplicably translated *prata* (obviously silver), as gold.

equally a Gentile and a great lord. They say that he has many towns and great cities, he has many horses as well as elephants, the elephants being from the kingdom of Pegu. They are pale men, they go about naked, and from the waist down cover themselves with cotton-cloth, and use much jewelry made of gold and precious stones. They worship idols, and have large houses of prayer. And the king at times makes war on his neighbouring kings, of whom some obey him, and others pay him tributes.¹¹

Barbosa then goes on to describe the pleasure-filled life of these kings in their cities full of tanks of water—a reflection, probably, of the canals and river-channels in and around Mrauk-U. He also describes a complicated and rather fantastic ceremony, by which each year twelve-year-old girls are taken into the royal household by the king as concubines. For our purposes, however, the interest lies not so much in Barbosa's exotic vision of a rich and barbarous Arakan (curious in its own right), but in his dismissal of the external trade of the kingdom. We may also note that neither he nor Pires make any mention whatever of a trade in slaves in this epoch.

Indeed, the slave-trade of Arakan is conspicuously absent in the literature for the greater part of the sixteenth century, while at the same time mention is made of Arakan as a centre for a growing nucleus of Portuguese privateers and "adventurers." Some of these men are known to have found employment as mercenaries in the expansion wars of Tabin-shwei-hti and Bayin-naung of the Toungoo dynasty in lower Burma, and from the late 1540s, they may be found gun-running and trading on behalf of Min Ba and his successors, who thus were encouraged to open relations with Goa.¹² It is with the reign of Min Palaung (1571-93), who also titled himself Sikandar Shah, that this Portuguese and Luso-Indian mercenary force assumes a major significance, aiding for example in the defence of Mrauk-U against attacks from the Toungoo rulers (an earlier assault had been turned back under Min Ba in 1546). Min Raza Gri (1593-1612) then took matters a step further, employing and negotiating with freelance Portuguese to further territorial expansion, on the one hand into the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta, and on the other into the very centres in the lower Irrawaddy delta from which the Toungoo dynasty had earlier mounted its raids on Arakan.

¹¹ Neves Águas, ed., *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa* (Lisbon, 1992), 157-58.

¹² Cf. the diplomatic correspondence between Min Ba and the Portuguese governor, D. João de Castro, from March 1546, in D. Fernando de Castro, *Crónica do Vice-Rei D. João de Castro*, eds. Luís de Albuquerque and Teresa da Cunha Matos (Tomar, 1995), 67-68.

The years between 1599 and 1610 possibly represent the greatest extension of Arakan power to the south, even if this power was based on the rulers' uncertain dealings with Portuguese entrepreneurs, notably Filipe de Brito e Nicote and later Sebastião Gonçalves Tibau. By 1614, as the Toungoo dynasty reconsolidated its position in lower Burma under Anauk-hpet-lun (1606-28), the Arakan ruler Min Khamaung (1612-22) was forced onto the defensive. To the threat of Portuguese mercenary sedition, occasional raids by official Portuguese fleets, and Toungoo pressure was now added the threat of Mughal restiveness, for from early in his reign Jahangir (1605-28), interested himself in the pursuit of the eastern affairs of the Mughal empire. Strapped for resources, and anxious to exploit the new trading relations that had opened up in the Bay of Bengal, the Arakan rulers sought to widen the range of their "tradeable goods."

It is of some importance in this context to note that the favourable trading conjuncture in the Bay of Bengal in the last quarter of the sixteenth century had integrated Arakan into new trading networks. We may recall that after about 1580, Chittagong (and its satellite town Dianga) had fallen definitively under Arakanese control as part of the long-term fallout of the breakup of the Gaur Sultanate, following a period of four decades when the region was dominated by Afghan *zamindārs*.¹³ However, from the perspective of maritime trade, Chittagong appears at much the same time to have taken second place in the Arakanese scheme of things compared with Mrauk-U, which was promoted as the principal centre for trade with Masulipatnam (arguably the hub of the fastest growing trading network in the Bay of Bengal in these years). Ships from Masulipatnam brought textiles, yarn, iron, and tobacco to Mrauk-U; in exchange, Mrauk-U could at first only offer rice from the coastal flood plains and elephants from the interior. By the early seventeenth century, participants in Arakan's external commerce included not only the powerful Persian trading community of Masulipatnam, but the Arakan rulers themselves, such resident Muslim merchants as a certain Haji Baba, and the so-called *kotwāl*, the equiva-

¹³ Cf. M. A. Rahim, "Chittagong under the Pathan Rule in Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 3rd Series, 18/1 (1952): 21-30; and S. B. Qanungo, "Chittagong under the Afghan Rule, 1538-1580," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 21/2 (1976): 54-75. Other historians claim an earlier date (c. 1550) for Arakan control over Chittagong; cf. S. M. Ali, "Arakan rule in Chittagong (1550-1666 A.D.)," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 12/3 (1967): 333-52.

lent in Mrauk-U of the Malay *tumenggung*, the official in charge of maintaining civic order.

The texts from the reign of Akbar in Mughal India, while not complimentary to the Arakanese, do not associate them with slaving. Abu'l Fazl, in his *A'īn-i Akbarī* (A'īn 15, "Account of the Twelve Subas") of the closing years of the sixteenth century, contents himself with noting that the Arakan rulers control Chittagong, that the kingdom possesses a large quantity of elephants (but few other animals), and that the religion is neither that of the Hindus nor of the Muslims. He also mentions that in Arakan, "sisters may marry their own twin brothers," a charge that Dutch factors were to reiterate a few decades later. Also of note is the fact that in his discussion of the eunuch-trade in Bengal (especially Sylhet), the Mughal chronicler—who is careful to specify the existence of three types of eunuchs: *sandal*, *bādām* and *kāfur*—does not associate their export with either the Portuguese or the Maghs (Arakanese).¹⁴

Within some decades, this situation had changed considerably. In 'Abd al-Hamid Lahauri's *Pādshāh Nāma*, a chronicle from the reign of Shahjahan, one of the major reasons given for the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hughli by the Mughals in 1632 was their association with the slave trade of Bengal.¹⁵ Ten thousand slaves were reputedly released in Hughli when it fell into Mughal hands. The text does not implicate the Arakan rulers directly, but the inference is not far to seek. We have already noted that rulers such as Min Palaung and Min Raza Gri, in the late sixteenth century, cultivated close relations with the Portuguese and Luso-Indians settled in the eastern part of the Ganges delta. Thus, men such as Manuel de Matos, Domingos Carvalho, Filipe de Brito, and later Sebastião Gonçalves, all played the role of interstitial tributary chieftains, with some power to negotiate with the

¹⁴ Abu'l Fazl Allami, *A'īn-i Akbarī*, trans. H. S. Jarrett, rev. Jadunath Sarkar, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1948; New Delhi: reprint, 1989), vol. 2, 132-36. Also see Gavin Hambly, "A Note on the Trade in Eunuchs in Mughal Bengal," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94/1 (1974): 125-29.

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Hamid Lahauri, *Pādshāh Nāma*, eds. Maulavi Kabir al-Din Ahmad, Maulavi 'Abd al-Rahim and W. N. Lees, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1866-72), vol. 1, 434-35. For a translation, see H. M. Elliott and J. Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own historians*, 8 vols. (London, 1867-77), vol. 7, 31-32. In fact, Shahjahan, as prince Khurram, had been in Bengal in the 1620s; cf. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "'Through the looking glass': Some comments on Asian views of the Portuguese in Asia, 1500-1700," in Artur Teodoro de Matos and Luís Filipe F. Reis Thomaz, eds., *As Relações entre a Índia Portuguesa, a Ásia do Sueste e o Extremo Oriente: Actas do VI Seminário Internacional de História Indo-Portuguesa* (Macau/Lisbon, 1993), 377-403.

Mrauk-U court, albeit from a position of subordination.¹⁶ In the complex structure of chieftaincies of southeastern Bengal, the Portuguese who controlled Dianga and Sandwip came to be players together with the so-called *bârâ bhûinyâs*.¹⁷ These “Twelve Chiefs,” we may note, were the powerful *zamîndârs* of southeastern Bengal who managed between the 1570s and the mid-seventeenth century to resist Mughal imperialism by a series of local alliances and the periodic aid of the Arakan rulers. Chief among them were the *râjas* and *zamîndârs* of Sripur, Jessore, Bakla (Bakarganj), and Hijli, but precedence seems to have been given by them, hierarchically, to the Indo-Afghan rulers of Khidrpur.¹⁸

We are aware that the position of the Indo-Portuguese *zamîndâris* of the area had become precarious from the time of the succession at Mrauk-U of Min Khamaung (r. 1612-22), a moment when tensions between the Arakan court and Sebastião Gonçalves reached new heights. Earlier, already, Filipe de Brito’s more-or-less successful negotiations with Goa, and his desire to hive off the lower Burmese port of Syriam from the spheres of influence of the regional dynasties in Arakan and lower Burma, had created a situation in which he was viewed negatively by both the Arakan and Toungoo rulers. Raids by the Arakan rulers on the Portuguese settlement of Dianga are reported in the 1610s, with severe consequences for the Portuguese settled there; the abortive expedition sent against Arakan in 1615 by the viceroy Dom Jerónimo de Azevedo, and the eventual collapse of Gonçalves’s *zamîndârî* at Sandwip, only further weakened the Portuguese situation.¹⁹ Sensing an opportunity, the Dutch East India Company (or VOC) moved quickly in the 1620s to explore the Arakan trade afresh, from both Batavia and its trading posts on the Coromandel coast.

Indeed, it is a matter of some interest that Dutch trade in Arakan became established on a firm footing before the Dutch East India Company (or VOC) made inroads into the commerce of Bengal proper, which was only in the 1630s. What was the particular interest that the region held for the Dutch? The products for exportation are fairly

¹⁶ H. Hosten, “Jesuit Letters from Bengal, Arakan and Burma (1599-1600),” *Bengal Past and Present* 30/59-60 (1925): 52-76.

¹⁷ H. Hosten, “The Twelve Bhuiyas, or Landlords of Bengal,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 9/10 (1913): 437-49.

¹⁸ For a discussion, see Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Delhi, 1994), 146-48.

¹⁹ Presumably, it is to this expedition that Hall refers when he mentions how “Tibão (*sic*) made a great attack on Mrohaung in 1615;” cf. D. G. E. Hall, “Studies in Dutch Relations with Arakan,” *JBRSS* 26/1 (1936): 1-31 (in 3 parts): 2.

straight-forward when one inspects the *facturas* (bills-of-lading) of Dutch vessels: paddy (rice in the husk) and rice, gum-lac, wax, certain coarse qualities of textiles, and *above all* slaves. Since the trade was conceived initially from a base on the Coromandel coast of southeastern India, the goods imported into Arakan were also rather well-defined: mostly textiles (especially painted textiles), iron from interior Andhra, yarn (especially red cotton yarn), and tobacco from the Krishna-Godavari deltas. The prime motivating force behind this trade was quite clearly slave-procurement, both for household use in the Dutch settlements, and—from the outset—in eastern Indonesia, where the Dutch Company had begun selectively to wipe out or relocate the indigenous population.

As we move into the 1630s, and then especially after Melaka fell into Dutch hands in 1641, the short-haul trade across the Bay of Bengal to Coromandel was increasingly supplemented (and to an extent even replaced) by ships coming first from Batavia (Jakarta), and then Melaka. With these vessels, the profile of Dutch imports into Arakan had to change as well, for Coromandel goods could no longer form the principal basis of the incoming cargo. Instead, Chinese ware (especially coarse porcelain), and cash in the form of rials-of-eight and rix-dollars were the principal goods, supplemented by some Moluccan spices, and pepper.

It was thus possible during the reign of Thirithudhamma (1622-38) for the Arakan rulers to open direct diplomatic relations with Batavia, and fragments of a correspondence (conducted, amusingly, in Portuguese) are available to us, especially from the 1630s. Perhaps the first Arakanese ambassadors to the Governor-General and Council of the Dutch Company arrived at Batavia on board a VOC vessel in 1634, and were taken back later the same year.²⁰ Relations were often tense already in this epoch, especially once the Dutch entered into trade relations with Bengal proper, and received trading privileges from the Mughals. The Mughals, as Thirithudhamma wrote in no ambiguous terms to Batavia, were the enemies of the Arakan rulers, and we are aware that skirmishes, raids, and counter-raids were a feature of their relationship already in the reign of Jahangir. The VOC had to tread cautiously in order not to offend either of these two neighbours and rivals, and were thus anxiously on the lookout for any signs that the two might reconcile. The arrival of an ambassador sent by the *sūbadār*

²⁰ H. T. Colenbrander, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia, Anno 1631-1634* (The Hague, 1898), 367, 389.

Islam Khan, resident at the provincial Mughal capital of Dhaka, to Mrauk-U in 1637 was hence seen by the VOC in positive terms, for they thought it would facilitate their trade in the Chittagong region, heavily contested by the two powers.²¹ From this period also dates the diplomatic correspondence, sometimes rude, and sometimes merely threatening, between the Mughal governor and Thirithudhamma. One of Islam Khan's letters to Thirithudhamma runs thus:

The choicest of chiefs, the Raja of Maghs, may have known that the mandatory *farmān* of His Majesty (...) Shahjahan Ghazi had been issued (...) that wherever in the environs of Bengal anyone shows refractoriness, contumacy and disturbances, his name should be effaced and removed from the record of the times.²²

This warning applied to the rulers of Assam and Tippera, but equally to the addressee of the letter, Thirithudhamma. Islam Khan then went on to detail the campaigns of his own soldiers in Assam, under the command of his brother Shaikh Zain al-Din Muhammad, comparing the Mughal soldiers of valour with ancient heroes of Persian myth. Concrete threats now accompany this flow of Islamicised and Persianised rhetoric, as Islam Khan makes it clear that he planned an imminent expedition to the city of Arakan (Mrauk-U, or al-Rakhang in Persian):

It is better if you repent of your evil deeds and undesirable activities, and wearing the ring of submission in your ears, read the *khutba* and issue coins in the name of His Majesty, the *khalifa*; otherwise, without hesitation, we shall bring the whole territory of Chatgaon and Rakhang under the hooves and feet of our horses and elephants.

The letters closed with a further Qur'anic injunction to "Obey God, obey the Prophet, and those placed in command over you," directed pointedly at this ruler of Buddhist persuasion.

As we can see here, the slave-raids of the Arakan rulers were a crucial concern for the Mughals, as indeed they were—in quite another sense—for the VOC. The Dutch, for their part, were interested, as we have noted, in a sort of peace, to the extent that it provided better general conditions for the conduct of their trade. But total peace would

²¹ Colenbrander, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia, Anno 1637* (The Hague, 1899), 71-72.

²² Islam Khan to Thirithudhamma, c. 1637. Ghulam Sharafuddin Qadiri Rashidi, compiler, *Ashraf al-Musauwadat*, in Syed Hasan Askari, "The Mughal-Magh Relations down to the time of Islam Khan Mashhadi," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 29th Session, (Gauhati, 1959)* (Bombay, 1960), 201-213, esp. 209-10 and 211-13.

have been problematic, in the sense that slave-procurement was related directly to war. It was thus in the interest of the Dutch to preserve an endemic, low-scale conflict, which would be reflected in seasonal raids made by the *armada* of the Arakan ruler on the villages of south-eastern Bengal.

The logic of the slave trade

The history of Dutch involvement in the slave trade of Arakan throws up a number of related issues of a commercial and moral nature. The matter is not merely a question of how we, from our perspective of three-and-a-half centuries later, judge the moral standing of the various parties, but of how they themselves, and their contemporaries, saw matters. After all, the Arakan slave trade was roundly condemned by a number of contemporaries, both European and Asian; Mughal reaction to Arakan and Portuguese slave-raiding in Bengal has already been noted. A typical European text is by the French doctor, François Bernier, in his account of the aftermath of the war of succession at the end of Shahjahan's reign in the late 1650s. Recounting the expedition against Chittagong by the Mughal governor Shayista Khan (1666), he begins by noting that the King of "Rakan or Mog" had long protected a set of Portuguese and mestizo settlers, who were all great sinners, "Christians only in name." Massacres, assassinations, and sexual misdemeanours were apparently legion amongst this community, but still they were used by the Arakan ruler to ward off the Mughals, by "permitting them to occupy a seaport called Chatigon." Given to "rapine and piracy," it was these Portuguese who were really responsible for the slave trade in Bernier's view:

They scoured the neighbouring seas in light galleys, called galleasses, entered the numerous arms and branches of the Ganges, ravaged the islands of Lower Bengal, and, often penetrating forty or fifty leagues up the country, surprised and carried away the entire population of villages on market days, and at times when the inhabitants were assembled for the celebration of a marriage, or some other festival. The marauders made slaves of their unhappy captives, and burnt whatever could not be removed. It is owing to these repeated depredations that we see so many fine islands at the mouth of the Ganges, formerly thickly peopled, now entirely deserted by human beings, and become the desolate lairs of tigers and other wild beasts.²³

²³ François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*, trans. Irving Brock, ed. Archibald Constable (Delhi, 1968); rev. and ed. Vincent A. Smith (Delhi, 1989), 175; the whole discussion occupies 174-82. The editor also notes a marking on a section

Not only this, the slaves thus captured were treated with great cruelty, and even cynically ransomed to their own families without the slightest regard for morality. Reflecting on the plight of these “wretched captives,” and the “horrible traffic” in slaves, Bernier goes on to note that “it is lamentable to reflect that other Europeans, since the decline of the Portuguese power, have pursued the same flagitious commerce with these pirates”—perhaps a *sotto voce* critique of the Dutch?

The slightly later account of the taking of Chittagong in 1666, written by the Venetian adventurer Niccolò Manucci, adds salacious and characteristically colourful (if not always plausible) details. Once more, the Portuguese of Chittagong are placed at the centre of the affair, “men hard of heart, accustomed to kill even little children without regret.” Like Bernier, Manucci is also severe on the Augustinians, whom he sees as instigating the Portuguese “pirates” in their evil deeds, singling out the dramatic (but possibly apocryphal) figure of a Frei Vicente, who always went about “clothed in scarlet.” He also suggests that differences had arisen between the Portuguese of Chittagong and Dianga and the rulers of Arakan, on account of the fact that the former had assassinated “a great prince of Arakan.”²⁴ In his condemnation of the Portuguese, Manucci returns here to an earlier discussion in his text, reporting the flight to Mrauk-U of the Mughal prince Shah Shuja’, and his death there in early 1661 after disputes with Sandathudhamma. To Manucci, the Portuguese slave traders “were unworthy not merely of the names of Christians, but of men;” the rulers of Arakan, who relied on them for their defence, are portrayed for their part as the most uncouth barbarians who drink “raw buffalo blood,” and who “could not compare in dignity, refinement, or pleasant habits with even a simple captain among the Moguls.”²⁵ In this last judgement, he probably reflected the prejudices of the Mughal *ashraf* class, to whom the jungles and marshes of Arakan no doubt seemed inimical to the efflorescence of refined Persianised habits.

The naïve reader of these contemporary historians may even be tempted to a form of geographical determinism, in which the slave

of James Rennell’s 1780 map of the Sunderbans, “Country depopulated by the Muggs.” For a discussion, also see Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 220-21, 234-36. For the French text, see François Bernier, *Voyage dans les Etats du Grand Mogol*, ed. France Bhattacharya (Paris, 1981), 131.

²⁴ Niccolao Manucci, *Mogul India*, or *Storia do Mogor*, trans. William Irvine, 4 vols., (reprint, Delhi, 1990), vol. 2, 109-110.

²⁵ Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, vol. 1, 350-55.

trade of Arakan inevitably emerges from the unholy alliance of the barbarous Maghs (or Arakanese), and the lawless half-caste Portuguese of the marshes, swamps, and islands of the mouth of the Meghna, both brought down to sub-human levels by the debilitating effects of tropical humidity. Contrasted to this is the "true Christian" sensibility of men like Bernier and Manucci, and the *mission civilisatrice* of the Mughals, who had—from the reign of Akbar at least consistently made high-sounding policy statements opposed to the idea of slavery. But there is surely more to the story than meets the eye, not least because slavery as an institution did not disappear in Mughal India, despite the pious wishes of Akbar, Jahangir, and a host of others. At the risk of some simplification, we shall attempt an analytical synthesis in the paragraphs that follow, before entering into a detailed narrative.

In the first place, it would bear repetition that a substantial slave trade is not to be observed from Bengal for much of the sixteenth century, with the exception of the rather specialised trade in eunuchs from Sylhet. The slave trade as we encounter it by the 1620s (when the Dutch factor, Jan van den Burch, wrote his report of 1625, for example), involving the yearly transport of several thousand peasants and artisans from southern and eastern Bengal to Arakan through the process of slave-raids, was thus an innovation, which we can date back at most to the reigns of Min Palaung and Min Raza Gri. This slave market developed rapidly, and the ports of Hughli, Chittagong-Dianga, and Mrauk-U all played a role therein. By the early seventeenth century, it was common for households in Portuguese western India, for example, to have converted Christian slaves designated "*bengala*," as we see from inquisition records of that period. It seems probable that these slave-raids were also a means by which jungle was cleared and land brought under cultivation in Arakan; thus the royal practice of setting down slave populations "in the forest" (*int bosch*) as our Dutch sources repeatedly insist, had a pragmatic purpose.

In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the Mrauk-U kingdom, hitherto a somewhat marginal player in international seaborne trade, was drawn into these networks for a variety of reasons. Firearms and mercenaries were needed from abroad to defend Mrauk-U against the ambitions of the rulers of lower Burma, and the consumption of imported textiles, iron and steel, tobacco, and even Chinese wares was on the upswing. A new cosmopolitan élite, drawn from a variety of regions and cultures, was amassing to make Mrauk-U a centre to rival Dhaka, Ava and Pegu, and even perhaps Bandar Aceh. But what did

Mrauk-U have to offer in exchange for its imports? The Augustinian writer, Frei Nicolau da Conceição, who in the mid-1640s attempted in vain to persuade the Portuguese king, Dom João IV, of how essential it was to conquer Arakan, makes use of various subterfuges in addressing the problem. At one point, he moves the discussion from Arakan to Mughal Bengal, making out that the whole region is a major producer of agricultural goods (indigo, wheat, rice, oil, and butter), saltpeter, iron, and above all textiles (“the finest there are in the Orient”). In fact, as we see from the Dutch bills-of-lading, only coarse textiles were to be had at Mrauk-U and even Chittagong, for the most part, and most of the other goods in Frei Nicolau’s list—save rice—do not even figure in the exports (which are of gum-lac, wax, and forest-products for the most part). Frei Nicolau then goes on, directly addressing the area of Chittagong and Arakan:

The King of these two kingdoms is very rich: he is the lord of great treasures of gold and precious stones. Of gold, because the land produces it, and he has alchemists who through alchemy make gold of the purity of eight or nine *males*, which circulates in all of India. He has treasures of precious stones, for they are found in the land, and it borders on the mountains of Ova [Ava], where the best and richest rubies are to be found that there are in the world.²⁶

In fact, Arakan exported little or no gold in this period, and the rubies passed for the most part through the ports of lower Burma (Syriam, Cosmin, and above all Martaban), in the control of the Restored Toungoo Dynasty. The Augustinian friar then goes on to note the large fleet (*armada*) of the Arakan rulers, consisting of ships and boats of various sizes, many of them well-armed with artillery and manned by “Portuguese and Christian topasses.” The unspoken purpose is to show that this fleet too was a major resource in the generation of wealth, obviously through the slave-raids.

The Mrauk-U kingdom was thus propelled into the slave trade by two compulsions: the shortage of domestic manpower (especially skilled manpower), and the logic of its involvement in international trade, which required a second export commodity besides rice, which could never sustain more than a coastal and ballast trade, especially given the highly uncertain agrarian conditions of the flood-plains of the Lemro and Kaladan river-systems. The Dutch entered nicely into this plan up

²⁶ Caixas da Índia, No. 16 [340], Doc. 67, dated March 1644, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon; text published in Marques Guedes, “D. Martim, um príncipe arra-canês,” 74-79.

to a certain point; from the government of Jan Pietersz. Coen in the 1620s, they saw it as useful to meet a part of their Indonesian demand for slaves here, as much as from areas like the island of Buton in eastern Indonesia (just south of Sulawesi), which appear to have been far more limited in their ability to supply slaves.²⁷ The sources for Dutch demand, which surely merit further exploration on a separate occasion, appear to have lain partly in the domestic use of slaves in Batavia, and partly in the transport of slaves to the Banda Islands, or elsewhere, for agricultural work. However, from the viewpoint of the Arakan rulers, trade with the Dutch was also inherently conflictual, in view of Dutch tendencies to moralise (paradoxical, for buyers of and traders in slaves), and the fact that the VOC resented the attempts of Arakan's rulers to control all forms of trade rather tightly, with an elaborate network of officials, inspectors, scribes and the like.

We may rapidly survey the chronology of Dutch involvement in Arakan. Although the Dutch pre-companies had already established a presence in nearby Bandar Aceh by 1600, the first Dutch expeditions into the Bay of Bengal (specifically, to the Coromandel coast of eastern India) were organised only in 1605, after the foundation of the VOC. However, from early in their presence in the Bay of Bengal, Dutch Company employees expressed an interest in the trade of Arakan. Pieter Willemsz. van Elbing and Jan Ewoutsz. of the Dutch Company are known to have been at Mrauk-U within a few years of Paulus van Soldt's first voyage to Masulipatnam, and from the early 1620s, contact with the ports of Mrauk-U and Chittagong became more regular; three Dutch vessels are reported at Mrauk-U in November 1623. The commodity of major interest for the Dutch from the outset was slaves, captured by Arakan war fleets in sorties into eastern and southern Bengal in slave-taking raids. In their initial contacts, the Dutch were at first given hopes of being able to buy thousands of slaves; however, the ruler Thirithudhamma and his court then insisted that they should set up a factory in Arakan, which they refused to do. Less than a hundred slaves were eventually taken.²⁸ In the next two years, Dutch

²⁷ J. W. Schoorl, "Power, ideology and change in the early state of Buton," in G. J. Schutte, ed., *State and Trade in the Indonesian Archipelago* (Leiden, 1994), 40-42, 46-49. Also see, for a far more wide-ranging set of Southeast Asian examples, Anthony Reid, ed., *Slavery, bondage and dependence in Southeast Asia* (St. Lucia, 1983).

²⁸ Letter from De Carpentier, Specx, Vlack and Van Diemen, dated 27 January 1625, in W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der VOC*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1960-64), vol. 1, 156.

vessels were sent out again from Coromandel, and managed modest cargoes of slaves and rice. Heavy slave mortality hindered the trade, and it was reported that of 10,000 slaves brought by Thirithudhamma from Bengal, over 4,000 had died quickly; the Dutch themselves purchased some 544 slaves in Arakan, but only a quarter survived. The Dutch also noted that there was a great unhappiness expressed already at this stage over their slave trade, especially by the “Moorish” nations (presumably on moral grounds, since in the process, Muslims could be sold to Christian masters).²⁹ Dutch contacts with Arakan continued to be sporadic thereafter: the occasional sending of an *onderkoopman*, the odd present sent to Thirithudhamma, the arrival of the latter’s trading vessels at Pulicat (the major Dutch centre in central Coromandel). The wars between Arakan and Pegu in 1630, and between Arakan and Bengal in 1632, deterred the VOC from expanding their investment until the mid-1630s, with the sending of Adam van der Mandere as *opperkoopman* to Mrauk-U in 1635 and the arrival of Arakanese envoys at Pulicat and Batavia in the same period.

Van der Mandere managed to receive two *farmâns* from Thirithudhamma in 1635, one granting the Dutch the right to sell iron, nutmeg, mace, and cloves, the other permitting the purchase by the Dutch of rice, paddy, indigo, gum-lac, wax, white textiles, and dungarees, as well as male and female slaves.³⁰ There was a condition however on the slave purchase: the Dutch could only buy slaves freshly arrived from Bengal (*nieuwe Bengaelders*). These grant letters are of particular interest for the titulature used by the Arakan ruler, and for the administrative structure that emerges therefrom. They are issued in the name of the “All-Powerful King in the middle of these places of many great kingdoms, Lord of the Golden House, Lord of the White and Red Elephant, the Righteous King upon this earth of the said places, Maha Sri Sudharma Raja (*Maciry Sondomina Rasa*).”³¹ One of them addresses a series of

²⁹ For a Dutch overview from the period of the prospects, see Jan van den Burch, Pulicat, to the governor-general and council at Batavia, 5 December 1625; Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague (ARA), Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren (OBP), Archieven van de VOC, VOC. 1087, f. 170-172v.

³⁰ ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143, f. 636-37 (another copy on f. 619-20), “Translaedt ofte coppije van verscheijden formans . . .”

³¹ The titles “Lord of the White and Red Elephant” and “Lord of the Golden Palace” are to be found on the coinage of the Arakan rulers: see Arthur P. Phayre, “The Coins of Arakan,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 15/171 (1846): 232-37. Both titles also occur in the Bengali texts of their court, where the king is titled “śveta raka mātanga īśvara” (e.g. in Alaol, *Padmāvatī*), and his court as “hāṭaka vestīta gada” (Alaol, *Sapta*

officials: the governors, including the *kotwâl*, and the “Sachma” (perhaps *ca' khan*); the other refers to a superior administrator called the *sit-ke* (“Sicque”), and to a subordinate official called, in the uncertain Dutch transliteration of the epoch, the “*Rossij*.³² All of these are titles that we shall have occasion to encounter below.

The Dutch almost immediately began to complain about the manner in which trade was conducted, especially in regard to restrictive trade practices on the part of royal officials, often Muslims. To deal with these “extortions and evil practices,” the Dutch pondered military action by blockading the river-mouth that gave access to Mrauk-U from very early on, but eventually seem to have rejected this tactic. By late 1637, the Dutch Governor-General and Council could report that “the vexations there have begun to cease somewhat, and it is apparent that with the receipt of our missive written to His Majesty, we shall be restored to our earlier liberties and that the Company’s affairs shall, by all appearances, take on a better course there.”³³ But the experience of the next two decades proved otherwise, as a form of hostile trade continued, with Dutch Company employees constantly at loggerheads with Arakan officials, who sought to control and regulate their purchase of slaves and rice, the two goods in which they showed particular interest.

As has been noted, by the 1630s, the Dutch had a permanent position in the town of Mrauk-U itself (which they called “Araccan”), and also maintained an intermittent interest at Chittagong and Dianga by periodically sending a factor there with goods and cash. The Dutch factory (or “logie,” as they called it), was located south of the main urban centre at Mrauk-U, between the royal centre and the merchants’ residence, which they term “Moorsche Bandel” (from the Persian *bandar*). It was here that Dutch ships arrived, after a somewhat complex process of negotiating the Kaladan river. Usually, Dutch vessels were first sighted at the mouth of the river (from the so-called Badr Maqam on the promontory at the left-hand shore), and then met part of the way up the river by the first “watch” instituted on the right bank by

payakara); cf. Satyendranath Ghoshal, “Beginning of Secular Romance in Bengali Literature,” *Visva-Bharati Annals*, vol. 9 (1959): 68, 200.

³² It has been pointed out to me by Dr. Catherine Raymond that the Dutch heard these terms as they were pronounced by their interlocutors in Mrauk-U, who were themselves usually Bengali; thus a process of double distortion was inherent.

³³ Letters from Van Diemen, Lucasz. etc., 26 December and 9 December 1637, in Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven*, vol. 1, 658, 626-29. Also see p. 526 for an earlier letter from January 1636.

the Arakan rulers. These watches consisted of fleets of small oared vessels (called *jalias*), often equipped with firearms. When news was brought to the Bandel of the vessel's arrival, the Dutch captain (or *opperhoofd*) would seek permission from the court for it to come upriver. Meanwhile, the vessel having negotiated the islands in the river, and having passed the watches, would drop anchor off the settlement of Uritaung ("Orienton" to the Dutch) on the left bank.³⁴ If permission was granted, the ship would eventually mount to the Bandel, where it would be met with a lesser or greater degree of ceremony, depending on whether it came from Coromandel or from Batavia. Usually, before this, the gist of the letters that the ship's captain carried had already been transmitted to the head of the factory, the chief-merchant (*opperkoopman*, or *opperkoopman*), with a resumé of the gifts (*schenkage*) on board for the ruler and the principal persons (*grotien*) of the court. These men might react well or unfavourably, depending on the political situation in the court-city (a fact that the Dutch stressed), as well as on the recent comportment of the Dutch factors themselves (which the Dutch of course did not see as contributing in any way to the tenor of the relations).

Exploring the Dutch narrative

In what follows, we shall consider a slice of roughly two decades, from the mid-1630s to the mid-1650s, a period that is relatively well documented in the Dutch archives. This period runs from the time when Adam van der Mandere was still the *opperkoopman*, and Thirithudhamma still ruled Arakan, to the early part of the reign of Sandathudhamma. These are stormy years in the Dutch-Arakan relationship, but all the more interesting for that. Consider, for instance, a detailed letter that Van der Mandere sent to Antonio van Diemen, Governor-General at Batavia, in early January 1637.³⁵ The letter begins innocuously enough, reporting the arrival in Mrauk-U of the VOC yacht *Wessanen* from the Coromandel coast in early July the previous year, with a cargo worth more than 11,000 *florins*, mostly iron, some tobacco, textiles, yarn, etc. However, Van der Mandere reports his inability to raise a proper cargo for this ship on her return voyage; a mere fifteen pieces (*stucx*) of good

³⁴ For the Dutch perception of the entire system of control on the river, an invaluable aid is the late seventeenth-century map entitled "Kaart van de rivier van Arakan, van de mond tot de stad van dien naam," ARA, Studiezaal Kaarten, VEL. 261.

³⁵ Copie missive Adam van der Mandere uit Arracan, 10 January 1637, ARA, OBP, VOC. 1125, f. 477-85.

slaves (*cloecke slaeven*), worth 322 *tangas* have been sent, and that too only as late as December 1636.³⁶ The Dutch factor now explains his own failure, thus providing insights into the working of the Mrauk-U market. Shortly after the *Wessanen*, three other ships had arrived, one belonging to Muhammad 'Ali Turk with painted textiles and red yarn, a second of an unnamed owner also with textiles, and finally the Queen's ship, which even though it hit a sandbank, managed to land its cargo. The fragile Arakan market was thus flooded for the season with Coromandel textiles, and the price of the Dutch goods was threatened. Fortunately, in early October, two ships arrived from Batavia with cargoes of rials-of-eight and pepper. Things began to look better; by early January 1637, at the time of writing the letter, Van der Mandere had managed a lading of eighty-one slaves (sixty-one men, eighteen women and two children) for the *Oostcappel*, destined for Batavia, and of 280 slaves for the *Ruttem*, also bound for the VOC headquarters.³⁷

But this state of affairs was still unsatisfactory. The Dutch factor goes into further details. In mid-August 1636, his assistant, Pieter Cocqu, had as usual been sent (with a capital of 1500 *tanga*) to Chittagong to look into the purchase of rice and slaves. He managed to send some of both in the vessel of a certain Portuguese called Manuel Rodrigo Tigre; however, the rice market was very problematic. Despite their positive contacts with other Luso-Asian merchants (notably the spice trader Diogo de Sá), and with the powerful Muslim merchant-notable with the title Majlis ("Mangelis"), the Dutch were unable to get around the monopoly in rice that had been imposed "on pain of death."³⁸ This was the doing of the high functionary, the eunuch "Losclosy" (*eenen den opperste capado*) who had taken on the Chittagong rice trade as a revenue-farm. Van der Mandere reports his attempts to get an audience with the King in order to complain, and his inability to do so, because the king is surrounded by untrustworthy and dishonest

³⁶ In the 1630s and 40s, one Arakan tanga was worth approximately 1.1 to 1.2 Dutch florins.

³⁷ Bill-of-lading of the *Oostcappel*, 11 January 1637; bill-of-lading of the *Ruttem*, 31 January 1637; and bill-of-lading of the yacht *Wessanen*, 24 December 1636; ARA, OBP, VOC, 1125, f. 487-87v, f. 486-86v, and f. 488.

³⁸ In 1642, there was already another notable with the title of Majlis, described as a "new merchant" (*nieuw negosjant*), whose first ship was destroyed at Aceh. Van den Helm to Batavia, 31 October 1642, ARA, OBP, VOC, 1143, f. 632v. This post seems to have been inherited in Arakan from the Gaur Sultanate; cf. Bouchon and Thomaz, *Voyage dans les Deltas*, 86, 133, *passim*. It is equally referred to by Alaol, *Dârâ Sekandara Nâma*, as that of Majlis Navaraj.

characters (*de snooste dieven en schelmen*). In his effort to get around the “Losclosy” (apparently a distortion of the Persian title, *lashkar-wazîr*), who had a close control over the rice market, Van der Mandere determined to meet the chief royal councillor (*eersten Raed van den Coninck*), whom the Dutch term “Longrasa” (Lone Raza), but despite visiting his home and presenting him with gifts, was unable to bring the price of rice down from seven *tangas* per *carra* (of roughly 21 kg.). Van der Mandere pondered aloud on the question of strategy. One possibility would be for the Dutch themselves to seize the ship of the *lashkar-wazîr*, which he has hired from the king, and plans to send to Masulipatnam or Pulicat. But even cleverer would be to have it seized by officials of the sultan of Golconda, ruler over part of India’s east coast, for Golconda too had grievances against the Arakanese. Van der Mandere also mentions the possibility of turning the Acehnese against the ruler of Arakan, since several merchants from that kingdom were not being allowed to return from Mrauk-U to their original places of residence.

It is amusing to compare the Dutch portrayal of the malevolent figure of the *lashkar-wazîr* with a quite different view available from the Bengali text *Satî Mayanâ O Lora Chandrânî*, begun by the poet Daulat Qazi during the reign of Thirithudhamma, and completed by Sayid Alaol. It turns out that the poet’s patron was none other than the *laskara ujjîra* (the Bengali version of the Persian *lashkar-wazîr*), a certain Ashraf Khan, who in fact is said to have urged Daulat Qazi to compose the text by adapting an earlier Hindavi text. Ashraf Khan (a eunuch, in keeping with Islamic court-practice, as transmitted to Bengal and Arakan via the Sultanate of Delhi) is repeatedly praised to the skies by the poet as “high-souled,” “virtuous,” and “prosperous,” and his larger religious and spiritual affiliations are also set out. Thus, one of his verses runs:

*Dharma-pâtra śrîyukta Aśraph Khân
Hânâphî mojhâb dhare cistî khândân.*

That vessel of righteousness, the virtuous Ashraf Khan,
Of the Hanafite sect, and a Chishti lineage.³⁹

In the tropes that the poet uses, the patron’s name (with suitable epithets) is featured periodically: thus Ashraf Khan is a generous donor

³⁹ Daulat Qazi, *Satî Mayanâ* (Hamidi Press edition), 5, as cited in Ghoshal, “Beginning of Secular Romance,” 23.

and able lover (*dâtâ manobhava mane*), and equally “the jewel of the army and a wish-fulfilling tree in charity” (*laškara guṇa manî dâne kalpataru*).⁴⁰ But Daulat Qazi does concur with the Dutch factors in one respect, namely in attributing a great deal of power to Ashraf Khan, who is portrayed as having the *rājanīti* (government) largely in his hands.⁴¹

This was not to remain so at the end of the 1630s, for the political situation evolved considerably in 1638-39. By November 1638, Van der Mandere was writing to Van Diemen of the death of Thirithudhamma at the end of May that year, the succession of his son Min Sani, and the death of the latter shortly thereafter (on 26 June 1638), reportedly due to “witchcraft” practised on him already during his father’s lifetime. The Dutch factor thus indirectly confirms the account of Arakanese palm-leaf manuscripts, which claim that a certain Kuthala, a minister descended from the ruler Thazada (r. 1525-31), by means of the “magical art” called *Ya-da-yà*, had cast a spell on Thirithudhamma and killed him; after his death, his son was allegedly killed by poisonous medicines by Thirithudhamma’s “evil” queen, Nat Shin Mè, who had an alliance with Kuthala. Thus, Kuthala ascended the throne with the title of Narapatigyi.⁴² Van der Mandere, for his part, notes that after the death of Thirithudhamma’s son and heir, the new ruler was none other than their erstwhile friend, “Longrasa,” who “on 3rd July . . . was proclaimed King, and enthroned with the Queen, widow of the dead [King].”⁴³ The Dutch factor hastened to appear before him, was granted an audience on 19 July, and on presenting him with a gift, was assured that the Dutch would be free to trade, without regard to the trading monopolies instituted late in the previous reign. But political complications now arose. The governor of Chittagong, also of the royal family, is reported to have risen in revolt against Narapatigyi, claiming to be the rightful heir to the throne. By mid August, a maritime expedition was being prepared against Chittagong, and the Dutch heard rumours that their aid would be called upon. Not wishing to involve himself or the Company, Van der Mandere decided to load

⁴⁰ Verses cited in Ghoshal, “Beginning of Secular Romance,” 28-29, 32-33.

⁴¹ Daulat Qazi, *Sati Mayanâ*, 5-6, cited in Goshal, “Beginning of Secular Romance,” 14. It is unclear whether Ashraf Khan was the same as the all-powerful “Mahomedan Hajji” described by Collis, on the basis of Manrique’s account; cf. Collis, “The City of Golden Mrauk-U,” 248-49.

⁴² M. S. Collis, “The strange murder of King Thirithudhamma,” *JBR* 13 (1923): 236-43.

⁴³ Adam van der Mandere to Van Diemen in Batavia, (n.d.) November 1638, ARA, OBP, VOC. 1126, f. 291-97v.

up the vessels that were at the Bandel and depart in haste, if necessary.

On 5 September, the Dutch factor was summoned to the court, and told that he would have to provide six sharpshooters (*bosscheters*), since the Chittagong governor (*den Satigander*) had asked the Portuguese there to aid him. He refused after consulting his council, saying that he had no orders to this effect from Batavia, thus throwing the Arakan ruler into a rage. He threatened to seize the Dutch ship, and to break his pact of friendship with the *Edele Heeren* (the Council of the VOC). Shaken, Van der Mandere rushed back to the Dutch lodge and summoned the council once more. The interpreter (*tolck*), Don Antonio, with a pragmatic spirit, pointed out that the musketeers would be paid a monthly wage, and given food and drink. Far better to acquiesce in the king's plan, choosing the better of two evils ("van 2 quade het beste te kiesen"), so long as the musketeers were sent out only for two or three months. The council hence decided to give in to the king's demand, and this decision was conveyed to Narapatigyi. Van der Mandere now paints a gloomy picture of the future. If the king were to lose the campaign, the Dutch would suffer. Besides, the ruler of the Restored Toungoo Dynasty in lower Burma (*den peguer*) was waiting for a chance to pounce on Arakan. The only silver lining in this whole affair was the fall from grace of the "Losclosy," Ashraf Khan, who had been stripped of all his positions and goods, and after a long imprisonment was executed for his own arbitrary comportment during the earlier regime. One of his ships, sent out to Kalingapatnam in Orissa, had been lost, another, returned from Aceh with pepper and gold, had been seized by the king. On the other hand, the merchant-notable Majlis had weathered the political storm without a problem. Overall, Van der Mandere was not inclined to trust Narapatigyi. Haunting him was the affair of two Dutch children held prisoner by the court, the children of a certain Claes Hermansen. The new king had refused to release them, even though the old one had said he would do so. These rulers were unreliable, in Van der Mandere's view, claiming as they did that the promises of one were not binding on another. We are reminded of an earlier instance from the reign of Thirithudhamma: the son of a Dutch free-merchant, a certain Jacob Cortenhoeff, had been taken into custody by the *lashkar-wazîr*, circumcised (and perhaps even castrated) and converted to Islam, despite strenuous Dutch protests.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Colenbrander, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia, Anno 1631-1634*, 66, *passim*, entries for March 1632.

Nevertheless, the Dutch persisted in their trade for the time, receiving another *farmân*, this one from Narapatigy, in 1640, granting the VOC the free sale of tobacco (imported into Arakan from Masulipatnam). Van der Mandere's place was eventually taken by his subordinate Arent van den Helm, who had served in Arakan in a junior capacity from 1635. For a time in the early 1640s, he appears to have run the factory as *onderkoopman*, but in 1642 returned to Batavia to receive fresh instructions sending him back as *opperkoopman*. This inaugurates a most interesting phase of Dutch-Arakan relations, with Van den Helm emerging in the process as at first a privileged, and then a much-reviled, intermediary.⁴⁵

On his arrival in Mrauk-U on the ship *Neptunus* on 2 July 1642 (after a brief month-long voyage from Batavia), Van den Helm was as usual first met and escorted on the river Kaladan by four *jalias*. Then, at the Bandel the next day, he and his new *onderkoopman* were met by the *Sachma* (who we are told was, at this time, the king's brother-in-law), the *kotwâl*, and the *Rossij*, all of whom came on board ship. To the sound of pipes and drums, Van den Helm and his party were taken on four elephants to the Dutch lodge. Ten days later, he was received in audience by Narapatigy, with the monarch reclining behind his "window" (*venster*), and Van den Helm presenting him with a gift "according to the land's custom." Discussions arose on the conditions of trade, especially the export of slaves. In Van den Helm's absence, a *farmân* had been issued to his assistant Luijenburch, stating once more that the Dutch could only buy "new Bengalders," and further specifying that once the transaction for slave purchases had been finalised, the Dutch had to produce the slave before the two *sit-kes* (or royal officials) for inspection, and to register the name of the slave and the name of the seller. Further, if the slave was an artisan, and knew a trade (*ambacht*), the Dutch could not purchase or export him or her.⁴⁶ Narapatigy, in his audience of 10 July 1642, reiterated this principle bluntly: "I do not want that craftsmen should be sold to you, or taken out of the land," he is reported to have told Van den Helm.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ In 1641, Van den Helm claimed great intimacy and friendship with Narapatigy, whom he supplied with wine and Dutch spirits; cf. Hall, "Studies in Dutch Relations," 17-18.

⁴⁶ First *farmân* of 1642; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143, f. 636v. These artisans are likely to have been both weavers and wood-workers, since the palace at Mrauk-U featured elaborate wood-carving, largely made by slave-artisans (information from Dr. Catherine Raymond).

⁴⁷ Van den Helm to Van Diemen in Batavia, 31 October 1642; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143, f. 629-34 (another copy of the same f. 649-54).

The Dutch Company meanwhile had continued in its traffic, both in Chittagong and Mrauk-U itself. Pieter Cocqu, sent out as usual to Chittagong, had already purchased a hundred slaves that season. In late October, the king had sent out his raiding fleet (which Van den Helm terms his *armade*) to “little Bengal” (*cleyn Bengaele*, meaning the Chittagong area) under the command of a functionary termed “Senhor Courangrij,” this fleet, with other vessels from Chittagong, had the intention moreover of going as far as the Jagannath temple in Orissa (*d'pagode Jangernado*) to see if any pickings were to be had, and then return through Mughal Bengal, where the usual slave-raids would be conducted. Van den Helm piously concludes with the hope that God grants the Arakan fleet a good return, for the Noble Company’s profits were tied up in its success.

The exposed position of the Arakan ruler is brought home here, since his fleets were preying not just on Bengal but even on Orissa, and other centres. Van den Helm in the same letter reports a dispute with Golconda: a shipowning merchant of Masulipatnam called Isma'il Beg had been captured off Pegu with his vessel by the Arakanese *jalias* and brought to Mrauk-U; in retaliation, the chief *nâkhuda* of the Arakan king’s ship, a certain “Basalacan Sougrij,” had been held in Coromandel along with his vessel. Perhaps as a consequence, the next year the Arakan ruler decided to send his ships to Melaka (now under Dutch control), rather than to Masulipatnam.⁴⁸

In 1643, we once more have some quantitative details of the Dutch slave trade. In the *Neptunus*, which left for Batavia on 1 November 1642, Van den Helm sent out 225 slaves, comprising 126 men, 84 women, 7 boys and 8 girls. By early February 1643, he had a cargo of 150 others ready for the *Eendracht*, and by that ship’s departure in March, the final number had mounted to 200. At the end of October 1643, by the ship *Het Spaens Galjoen*, Van den Helm could once more send 600 “strong, young bodies,” including 299 men, 271 women, 18 boys, and 12 girls.⁴⁹ The Dutch were now sending out at least a thousand slaves a year from Arakan, besides the ones who died in their factory after purchase.

⁴⁸ Later, in October 1643, Mir Muhammad Sa‘id Ardistani, *sar-i khail* at Golconda, sent a present to the ruler of Arakan with his ship, to try and arrange the release of Isma'il Beg; cf. Van den Helm and Van de Water to Van Diemen, 30 October 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1151, f. 629.

⁴⁹ Bill-of-lading, 30 October 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1151, f. 611-12v, 618. Van den Helm to Jeremias van Vliet in Melaka, 22 February 1643; VOC. 1143, f. 611-12v.

Van den Helm sought in a tortuous way to link up this slave trade with agrarian conditions. In late 1642, he reported, "the rice had stood finer in the field than it had stood for some years." The local residents avowed that the price would fall to one or one and one-quarter *tangas*. In anticipation of this fall in rice prices, the Dutch bought up as many slaves as they could, since an abundant harvest could result in fewer slaves on the market. However, when the harvest was brought in, most of the "ears" of rice were found to be empty, which Van den Helm concluded was "a righteous punishment by God, Our Lord, over the whole land."⁵⁰ However, this meant that no rice was to be had by the Dutch, so that difficulties with local officials commenced again on this account. To further complicate matters, since 18 December 1642, Narapatigyi had ceased to give audiences, and the rumour ran that he was very ill indeed. There was thus no way for the Dutch to insist that he fulfil his promise, that on the occasion of the next harvest he would supply them with two shiploads of rice at market prices. Van den Helm's daily visits to the court were proving of no avail; in vain had he pleaded with the *Sachma*, the *kotwâl*, and other officials. Meanwhile, the Majlis had sent out six to eight vessels to Bengal, in the hope of getting some additional rice to put on the market.

But the dearth of rice had a "positive" effect on slave prices (sending them plunging down), even if it increased the cost of maintaining slaves. Van den Helm was anxious to send his stock of slaves off to Batavia as soon as possible, as they were burdening his "cash-box with the daily expenses." The letter continues with details of the experiences of the slave-raiding armada of the previous year, which had captured an Armenian ship ("near the pagode Jaggernado"), belonging to a Balasore-based merchant, while on its return from Aceh. Its crew, including several Portuguese and an English pilot, had been distributed as slaves among the court-notables at Arakan ("*sijn onder de groote verdeelt*").⁵¹ The letter then adds:

The said armada has also on its return here captured, in passing, eleven fully-laden Portuguese salt-boats, coming from Banga, with the intention of selling the salt and other goods they carried in Sieripoere [Sripur], which boats were destroyed by the armada and smashed on the land, so that His Majesty has had no other

⁵⁰ Arent van den Helm to Van Diemen in Batavia, 22 February 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143, f. 613-17.

⁵¹ Van den Helm had organised the release of this English pilot by October 1643. Cf. Van den Helm and Van de Water to Van Diemen, 30 October 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1151, f. 629v.

profit from them save the captured folk, anchors, and cables. His Majesty has had the captured Portuguese placed in the woods (*int Bosch*), so that they cannot run away, which is terrible for them. As they are Christians, may God Our Lord free them from this burden of slavery and the woods. Since then, the armada has been out once again and captured many slaves.⁵²

And yet, the very next month, writing to Van Diemen, Van den Helm poses the question of slaves in a rather different light. Noting the departure of the *Eendracht*, with a cargo of 200 slaves (besides some paddy, rice, wax, gum-lac, and coarse textiles), which he had largely purchased from some Luso-Indians (*eenige Toppassen*), he goes on to add that the king's armada had once more left Chittagong on its raids: "which undoubtedly will bring a good booty of slaves, may God so grant."⁵³

The quarrel ripens, 1643-47

We must await a long letter from Van den Helm, written at the end of October 1643, to pursue the next set of developments.⁵⁴ This is again a very valuable account from the point of view of describing the workings of the Arakan court. Van den Helm begins by evoking the atmosphere of uncertainty that had gripped the court in April and May 1643, as Narapatigyи refused to emerge from the interior of the palace or give an audience. Even the palace eunuchs (*cappados*) were not allowed in, and both the courtiers and the common man (*de groote en gemeenen man*) came to believe that the king was dead, and that this fact was being concealed by the queen, who issued all orders during this period. However, when unrest reached a point that the "land was wholly in revolt," the king called one eunuch in, and spoke to him; the eunuch then came out and reported that the ruler appeared to be in good health. The notables, who had begun to behave arrogantly, "each one believing that he was the king," now had to modify their comportment. The Dutch factor tended to see all of this as an elaborate royal strategy for determining loyalties, "for the Noble Company can find no more cunning and clever king in place, than this one who now presently rules, for one can trust no more in his words than one

⁵² Arent van den Helm to Van Diemen in Batavia, 22 February 1643, f. 616v-17; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143.

⁵³ Van den Helm to Van Vliet in Melaka dated 18 March 1643; Van den Helm to Van Diemen in Batavia, 10 March 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1143, f. 642-42v (for the reference to the *toppassen*); f. 645-46. The second letter adds that Narapatigyи is still not to be seen in public.

⁵⁴ Van den Helm and Van de Water to Van Diemen, 30 October 1643; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1151, f. 629v.

can in the wind that blows." One of the two special royal agents, the "white" (*blancque*) *sit-ke*, now sent a messenger (*courangh*) for Van den Helm, on 14 June 1643. The Dutch factor being unwell that day, he made his way to the palace only on the 15th, and found the *sit-ke* in his usual seat. After a few polite formulae had been exchanged, the latter came to the point. The king had instructed him to tell the Dutch that during the rainy season they were to buy no paddy or rice; prices were already high, and Dutch purchases put them up further, so that "the common and poor man could hardly get any." This was not an order, he insisted, only a request.

Van den Helm replied strongly, and with his usual self-righteousness. The Dutch had nothing to do with the prices, and anyway he had no rice or paddy in stock, since he had purchased none since the departure of the last ship. Not only that: prices were now lower than they had ever been in the past five or six years. The accusation against the Dutch was a "great abuse," he declared. In fact, the poverty of the common people was a result of the fact that they had to pay huge levies and taxes, so that men "had therefore to sell their women and children, house, garden, goods, and the very clothes from their bodies, in order to pay off their debts, which made them so poor and abject that they did not have even a stuiver with which to buy paddy or rice at home." The tyranny of the Arakan rulers might well drive their subjects to cannibalism in Van den Helm's view (adding the usual "God forbid," to close the phrase). Van den Helm was rather proud of this little speech. At the end of it, he reports, the *sit-ke* and other notables who were around looked at each other, and then "lowered their eyes downwards, thereby giving me to understand that what I had spoken was not far from the truth." The *sit-ke* now went into the interior of the palace, saying he would speak to the king; when he did not emerge for quite some time, Van den Helm returned to the Dutch lodge; no response could be had the next day either.

Finally, on 18 June, it was rumoured that the king would at last give a public audience (*openbaer pas*). Van den Helm hastened to the palace and took his "usual place" in the audience chamber; the occasion was an important one, for Narapatigyi had not appeared in public now for exactly six months. When he finally appeared, everyone was astonished to see how well he looked. Van den Helm had brought him a gift, a ball of musk and half a *ser* of eagle-wood, which the king accepted through the intermediary of a eunuch. The Dutch factor decided it was too early to broach the issue of a new *farmân*, and instead returned to the Dutch lodge to bury the daughter of his *onderkoopman*,

Abraham van de Water, who had died of smallpox (*kinderpoxkens*).

But business matters soon began to press. The very next day, 19 June, the *onderkoopman* Pieter Cocqu (here, Cocquij) arrived with word that the ship *Het Spaens Galjoen* from Batavia had been sighted down-river. Goods had been unloaded already, and some of the iron on board sold to the king's brother-in-law, the *Sachma* (here, "Cachma"). By the 23rd, the ship had arrived as far as the Bandel, and Narapatigyi now sent the *kotwâl*, the Majlis, the *Rossij*, and several others to the Dutch lodge to collect the letter from Batavia and the gift that he knew the ship would have for him. Accompanied by the Dutch merchants, the king's men went on board ship and accepted the gift and letter, which they ceremonially placed on top of their heads. On disembarking shortly thereafter in boats, they were met by three elephants, which they mounted "holding the letter in their hands over their heads," and accompanied by music and drums made their way to the Dutch lodge. This letter was in Portuguese, and on the 26th, the *kotwâl* and others (including two interpreters and two writers) were back to translate it into Magh.

It was only on July 12th that Van den Helm was eventually summoned to the court, in ceremony, accompanied by the *kotwâl*, the Majlis, and others, with the obligatory three elephants, drums, trumpets, and music. Taken to his usual seat in the court, the letter from Batavia was read out. Narapatigyi enquired after the Governor-General's health, and was told that "the friends who came with the ship had left His Nobility in bodily health, and it is to be hoped that he continues as such." The king then asked about the Dutch situation in Pulicat, Melaka, and other places; Van den Helm duly replied. The Dutch factor now thought it appropriate to broach the matter that was really on his mind. Kneeling down, he requested that in accordance with the letter from Batavia, he be given a new *farmân*. The king for his part replied that the matter could be taken up in the next audience.

The conversation now took an altogether curious turn. We may follow Van den Helm's own narrative:

His Majesty said: Captain, last year, you said that the Prince of Holland was about to enter into a contract of peace with the King of Portugal, how has that turned out? At which we told him that a Ten Years' Truce, both north and south of the equator had been signed, giving him all the details of the contract, as also the third article—speaking of all the Indian potentates and peoples who too were covered in the friendship and the said truce; which he heard with careful attention, and then said that he was greatly surprised that we had made peace with them, even though we very well knew of their falseness, and that they (unless he

were mistaken) were unreliable and intriguers, who were not to be trusted. I want no friendship with them, for they are rogues, who though they talk of friendship, will not abandon their scheming and falsehood. It is for each one to decide whether to be friends with them, but I have no need for their friendship.

The king is reported to have continued further in this vein, and Van den Helm reports that the “qualified Portuguese” residents of Mrauk-U, who were present in the court dared not raise their heads to object, “though one may well wonder how the sauce tasted to them.”⁵⁵

The audience finished on this note; two weeks later, Van den Helm was back in the court, still insisting that he wanted a new *farmân*, specifying that he could freely buy and export rice, paddy, indigo, wax, and slaves (male and female), of any vintage, “whether or not they know crafts . . . as in former times.”⁵⁶ The king flatly refused this last request, claiming that if he were to allow the Dutch such liberal terms, “my land would be bereft of working people.” Instead, he asked to see the old *farmân*, ostensibly to determine how it could be revised. At the next audience (on 1 August), this document (probably the 1642 text) was produced, and the following conversation is reported:

After His Majesty had understood the content of the firman, he then said: Captain, it does not state in that firman that you can buy craftsmen, and take them out of the land. We replied that it does not state either that we cannot buy them, but instead that we can buy only new Bengaelders, and that includes both craftsmen and peasants (*soo wel ambachts als lanthuyden*). His Majesty said, no, if you have purchased and taken them out before this, it was through stealth, and not by use of the firman. We said, if so far we have done it by stealth, we would ask Your Majesty that from now on it should be by firman. . . .

Leaving the *farmân* behind, Van den Helm returned to his lodge. At last, on 10 August, the *sit-ke* emerged from the interior of the palace and brought Van den Helm the new *farmân*, which he read out. The text, of which the Dutch translation is preserved, ran:

⁵⁵ Despite his heavy irony here, Van den Helm was careful to maintain good relations with men like Diogo de Sá, the Portuguese who maintained a correspondence with even Governor-General Antonio van Diemen in Batavia. But on still another occasion, in 1645, he refers to the “left-over mestizo descendants of the Portuguese” in Arakan with contempt. Van den Helm at Arakan to Batavia, 31 October 1645; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1159, fl. 371v.

⁵⁶ In fact the text of the five *farmâns* from 1635 to 1642 show that Van den Helm was prevaricating; there had always been a proviso that “de slaeven moeten nieuwe Bengaelders sijn.”

The Year 1005 of the Magh age, and of their rule, the 10th day of the waning moon, in the month of August 1643, the Lord of the Golden House, Lord of the White and Red Elephant, the Lord and Master of this world, Narabidigrij:

I order my notables [*groot*], Ammato [*ahmat-daw*], Lajamrebreijn, and Lawemrebreijn, the Governors of my right and left hand, Coutuwael [*kotwâl*], Mossulis [*majâs*], Coptoup, Roos, Antovantonsa, Sanpo, Sicques [*sit-kes*], and the rest (inspectors of the ships) that they should let the Captain Arent van den Helm freely and liberally purchase wax, gum-lac, *cachomba* [a red dye], indigo, and coarse white cloth. If paddy and rice are in abundance in my land, he may buy them in abundance, and if they are scarce, he should buy little; in keeping with this, I shall exercise my good judgement, and shall issue orders which you will have to follow. If he wants paddy, let him buy up to 500 *carras*, and if he buys no paddy, allow him to purchase 250 *carras* of rice. Let him buy [slaves from] Bengal, those that are now brought with the armada, save those who know crafts (*hantswerck*), whom I will not allow him to buy. Let him not buy a single slave here in my gold-rich land. I order all this, and require that in the future it should be so etc.⁵⁷

Van den Helm was taken aback by this *farmân*, which specified matters far more clearly than he required, and left him with no loopholes to exploit. At first, he refused to take it from the *sit-ke*, and changed his mind only when he received an urgent letter from Cocqu in Chittagong, saying that the governor there (the “Asogansougrij,” probably *aso-khan-thu-gvi*) would no longer accept the old *farmân*. He returned to see the king, who mocked him, saying (in Van den Helm’s own report), that he knew very well that the Dutch factor had his house full of slaves that he had illegally purchased in Mrauk-U, besides the ones he had from Bengal, adding: “Which captain has ever in his life sent as many slaves from there as you do every year?”

There was a certain justice in this comment. Moreover, Van den Helm knew on which side his bread was buttered. In 1643, he reports (to close his letter) that the Arakan armada had just defeated a Mughal fleet in Bengal, destroying seventy out of seventy-five vessels. The admiral (“Sr. Courangrij”) had left Mrauk-U once more on 24 September 1643, and news had arrived that three or four days later he had begun successful slave-raids in the Ganges delta (*naer de Ganges op slaven buijt is gegaen*). Besides, Courangrij had captured two Muslim-owned vessels returning from the Maldives. All of this success had in Van den Helm’s view gone to Narapatigy’s head, so that he had come to believe that he could make short work of the Christians if he so wished, and that “all nations should rightly fear him.” On Van den Helm’s last visit to the court, to invite the officials to inspect his slaves before embarking

⁵⁷ “Translaet vant firman door Sijn Maijt. int Coninckrijck van Arracan, aen den oppercoopm. Arent van den Helm...” ARA, OBP, VOC. 1151, f. 617.

them (before sealing the letter), he had found a substantial change there from August; the king, now once more sick and concealed from the public, had adopted a "reign of terror," and placed his own brother and close adviser (*naesten raet*), titled *Longrasa* (Lone Raza), in irons, a sure sign in the Dutch factor's view that he would soon execute him.

As for Narapatigyi himself, despite his illness, the king continued to rule for another two years, into late 1645. Relations with the Dutch steadily deteriorated through this period, and by the end of October 1645, when Van den Helm wrote one of his two annual letters to Batavia, tensions were palpable.⁵⁸ One serious problem lay in the fact that from 1644, the slave-raids to Bengal had ceased; the king's armada no longer went out in that direction. Van den Helm began to suspect that the Arakan slave trade had come to an end once and for all, and now rather blatantly took to buying slaves in Mrauk-U itself, in explicit contravention of the *farmân* of August 1643. Occasionally, a consignment of slaves came in from Bengal still, as in March, when the interpreter Rodrigo Pessoa arrived with some; Van den Helm purchased thirty slaves from this source. But, as he himself writes, since late February, when the last vessel, the yacht *Oudewater*, had been sent off, he had bought 176 slaves, of whom the vast majority (146, to be precise) were illegal purchases. The king's officials kept a close eye on the Dutch lodge, and the Dutch factor used elaborate devices to smuggle his "inland" slaves in and out, together with the few legitimate "Bengaelders" he had. On several occasions he was closely questioned and threatened with an inspection of the lodge; if this were to happen, the slaves would be cross-examined and Van den Helm would be shown up. He therefore stonewalled, insisting that only after the ships from Batavia arrived and the slaves had been loaded on, would he countenance an inspection. The local officials, exasperated at this attitude, are reported to have told him: "Captain, buy as many as you want, when you have paid their costs long enough, and fed them and made them glad, and want to embark them, we will not allow you to ship even one more than those who have been inspected and registered in the toll-houses at Pirwijn and Mahou, and who have come from Bengal." To which Van den Helm reports his own ambiguous reply: "I have not come here to sit still, but to buy slaves and slave-women, rice and whatever else is needed." The inspectors assured him

⁵⁸ Arend Jansz. van den Helm at Arakan to Cornelis van der Lijn and council at Batavia, 31 October 1645; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1159, f. 369-83.

that all those who sold him local slaves would be found out, and punished by having their fingers or toes cut off.

Van den Helm now philosophised concerning his position. The real problem was that there was “hunger and thirst” in the land; he asserts later in the letter that hundreds of people were dying every day from famine. He was continually pestered by people wanting to sell him slaves. “That which brings us sorrow in our innermost heart, and which is the heaviest or most hurts our heart, is that we can have no rest in the lodge, while we are continually pestered by the one for [buying] his wife, and the other for his sister or friend. . . .” All of this is the result of the tyranny of the *groote* in Arakan. The Dutch, for their part, were merely reluctant agents of larger forces, even if Van den Helm regrets at the same time that the slave-raiding armadas no longer went out.

And once more, the question of who could rightfully be enslaved comes to the fore. A Dutch free-merchant’s yacht, the *Goeden Engel*, had been captured off Arakan in December 1643, while engaged in either trade or, more likely, a combination of trade and corsair activity.⁵⁹ In August 1645, with the arrival of the yacht *Oudewater* coming once more from Batavia, a rather peremptory letter arrived for the Arakan ruler from the new Dutch governor-general, Cornelis van der Lijn (Van Diemen having died in April that year), demanding the release of those from the *Engel* who were being held—as was the custom—in a forested area (*int bosch*). The tone of this letter, when translated from Portuguese into Magh before the *kotwāl* on 22 August, rather dismayed that official. Nevertheless, it was agreed that three Dutchmen would be brought to Mrauk-U from the forest, and released into the custody of Van den Helm. It turned out, in point of fact, that only two of them (a steersman from Amsterdam who died shortly after his release, and a sailor from Antwerp) actually belonged to the *Engel*. The third, a youngster called Adriaen Cornelisz. van Moeck had actually been a crewman on a VOC vessel in 1643, and had jumped ship for fear of his skipper. Enslaved in Arakan, he had the good fortune to be released with the others on 7 September.

These negotiations were carried out between Van den Helm, the *Sachma*, and the *sit-ke* without direct royal intervention. However, on 20 September, the Dutch factor was at last summoned to the pal-

⁵⁹ For the first mention of this yacht, see Van den Helm’s letter to Batavia, 13 February 1644, as cited in Hall, “Studies in Dutch Relations,” 18.

ace, accompanied by the skipper Gerrit Andriesz. and three under-merchants. On this occasion, Van den Helm was never actually allowed to see Narapatigy, who remained in the interior of the palace with the *sit-ke* and *Sachma*. The whole interview was conducted through the *kotwâl*, who must have gone in and come out of the interior of the palace at least a dozen times. The conversation began with the king expressing sorrow at Van Diemen's death, and good health to his successor. Van den Helm now got to the point. He wanted a new *farmân*, and the release of the non-European, "black" (*swarte*) crewmen from the *Engel*, who were after all Dutch "subjects" from his viewpoint. The *kotwâl* refused, saying that only whites came under Dutch jurisdiction, and besides that, these were people who had killed some of Narapatigy's subjects. This was denied by Van den Helm, who wished throughout to conceal the distinction between Dutch free-merchants (*vrijburgers*), and the Company itself. He for his part stressed the privations suffered by these men in the forest; the *kotwâl* now brought back word that if Van der Lijn himself wrote on behalf of the black crewmen, the king would release them. At last, the *sit-ke* (who meanwhile had also emerged from the interior) lost his temper, and declared that despite the thirty (*sic*) years of friendship between the rulers of Arakan and the VOC, it was clear that the Dutch were determined "to break the friendship," as Van der Lijn's rude letter showed. He harangued not Van den Helm directly, but the uncomprehending skipper and under-merchants, "but since none of them understood or could speak either Portuguese or even less the Bengali language (*de bengaelse taele*), they only gave as answer: *No Entendo.*"

Van den Helm now went on the offensive, threatening to pull his factory out of Arakan if need be. An impasse was reached, with neither side willing to yield. Van den Helm's letter to Batavia hence concludes by agreeing with the governor-general's proposal that the factory be abandoned "with pack and sack," if the king "persisted in his unreasonable procedures"—but only as a means of forcing the Arakan ruler to yield "better terms."⁶⁰ True, the rice harvest looked promising, but nothing could be guaranteed even on that front. We may note besides that the Dutch factor was heavily in debt, having borrowed on the local market at what he himself terms "cancerously heavy interest."

⁶⁰ Cf. the letter from Cornelis van der Lijn and Council at Batavia to the Heren XVII, 9 July 1645, in Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missiven*, vol. 2, 270.

But with Narapatigyi's death in late 1645, and the accession of his young nephew Thado Mintara, the VOC hesitated to pull out. For did not the new king make "lovely promises" (*schone beloften*) that their purchases of rice and "new Bengaelders" would be facilitated? A new *farmân* was issued, but shortly thereafter rice sales to the Dutch ceased on royal orders. Van den Helm was furious, seeing this as another sign of the devious nature of the Arakan rulers, the more so since he claimed to have given out a "good sum of money for the delivery of rice."⁶¹ The Dutch factor now asked the king to intervene to recover his debts, but the latter refused; the Dutch request to procure the rice from Bengal on royal account was also turned down. Van den Helm, in his letter to Batavia of October 1646, now launched into a tirade against Thado, who acted so arbitrarily in each and every matter that even his subordinates were already tired of him. There were no limits to his tyranny: "Further, in the month of last March, he has had all the Muslim, Gentile and Christian prisoners (some of them held for six years, some for three and some for more years), who had been brought here on ships, made into grasscutters for his elephants and rowers on his boats." Similarly, the widow of the late Portuguese Diogo de Sá had been taken into the royal household ("to her great sorrow"); the Dutch factor maintained difficult contacts with her through one of her slaves, since he owed her and her late husband a good sum of money. Meanwhile, Van den Helm claims that both rich and poor groaned under Thado's tyranny: "We have heard the *groote* saying on various occasions that his reign shall not last long (and that he shall not come to a good end). . . ."

A long discussion then follows in the letter on how Thado had taken it upon himself to control the market for money-changing, thus further cramping the activities of the VOC in Mrauk-U. Batavia had told Van den Helm to test out the new king for a year, "to see what course his reign takes, and what favours we receive from him;" now Van den Helm was convinced that there was no sense in continuing. But there is an important, and unwritten, sub-text here: the market for slaves was becoming more and more difficult, as the shortage that had begun in 1644 continued for the Dutch. Thus, in early 1647, without warning the authorities of his intention, Van den Helm quickly wound up the factory and departed.

⁶¹ "Copia missive aen de E: Hrn. Raeden van India pr. t'fluijt schip Uitgeest, in dato ultmo Octob. 1646 geschr: Arracan," by Arent van den Helm etc.; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1163, f. 178-91.

Revisiting Arakan, 1650 and 1653

Arent van den Helm, on his return to Batavia, left Company service to become a *vrijburger* by the late 1640s, in which capacity he had a successful career until his death in the VOC's Asian headquarters in 1661. The suspicion that he had made a good deal of money while at Arakan lingers over him, but he did hold various minor representative offices, and was even named envoy (*gezant*) to Banten in 1655; the Company, for its part, apparently was satisfied with his conduct at Arakan. However, already in 1649, the VOC had reason to rethink its decision to abandon its Mrauk-U factory in such haste, especially after Thado sent out an envoy (referred to as a *paep*, though probably a Buddhist monk rather than a Catholic priest) to Batavia. In late October that year, one Jacobus Hensbroeck was then sent out by the Company from Batavia, in the yacht *Leeuwerk*, to see if matters could be remedied. Since the daily diary (*dagh-register*) of his mission has survived, we have a particularly intimate view of his activities between January and March 1650, while he was at Arakan.⁶²

The Dutch yacht arrived at the mouth of Kaladan, right by the *badr maqâm* (in Dutch, *bodder mogon*) on the promontory at Akyab at sunset on 5 January 1650. Here, it was met by the usual patrolling ("wacht houdende") *jalias*, and set the Arakan envoy (or *paep*) down on land, so that he could carry news to the court of their arrival. Thus began a strange two-month long sojourn, which—to anticipate our narrative—was to gain the Dutch Company little or nothing, but which is nevertheless valuable for its minute description of the embassy and its vicissitudes.⁶³ By 6 January, the yacht was anchored on the river, just south of Uritaung, and arrived at that port itself the next day. A couple of days later, the *paep* returned from Mrauk-U, accompanied by the *kotwâl*, *royck*, and some other notables, all of whom assured the Dutch that their return was very welcome, and that the residents of the Bandel were particularly happy to hear they had come back. However, they

⁶² "Extract uit het daghregister onser arracanse voyagie met t'jacht d'Leeuwercq den 22en october anno 1649 aengevangen synde t'notabelste soo ons uit selve rycq is wedervaren," ARA, OBP, VOC. 1177 f. 124-155; another copy on f. 156-95.

⁶³ There is a vast literature of varying quality—ranging from editions of texts to sophisticated commentaries thereon—on Dutch embassies to various seventeenth-century Asian courts. For useful comparative elements, see for example, John E. Wills (Jr.), *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

stated that Thado himself was not immediately accessible, for he had gone to the religious centre of Paragiri with a great retinue to look to the affairs of the Pagoda there; it might take him two or three weeks to return to Mrauk-U. It was therefore decided to send the *paep*-ambassador, now identified as a certain Ugga (*Ouga*), to Paragiri, with word of what the Dutch wanted, and a translation of the letter Hensbroeck carried from Batavia.

Various complex transactions now ensued, with a part of the Dutch party finally being permitted to go upriver in search of the ruler, accompanied by a local escort that restricted their movement. On the morning of 24 January, Hensbroeck and his men found themselves near the Rabba hill, off the villages of "Tchang Monjong," and "Chierangh." Bamboo huts were quickly set up here to house them, and that very day the Dutch party learnt that Thado had left Paragiri for another spot, two days' journey further upland, with the intention however of returning soon.

For the next few days the Dutch remained in this spot, with nothing to do. On the 26th, the king's agent (*adel*), in order to entertain them, sent to a nearby village for "two wild or mountain-men of these lands, whom they made dance and sing for our entertainment, taking great pleasure in ridiculing them, and in mocking, though we could see no great difference between the wild and the established Magh, other than that one was more poorly clad and seemed to have cruder or rougher manners."⁶⁴ The Dutch party now grew restive, as it became clear that Thado had not yet returned to Paragiri. Hensbroeck therefore insisted with Ugga, the *rooyck*, and others that a letter be sent to Thado, stating that they had to leave soon and, consequently, that it was urgent that their affairs be attended to. He also wrote a rather complaining letter to Thado, accusing his servants of treating the Company with "great disrespect," abandoning them "with the slaves here in the wilderness (*dorrevelt*), with great cold, discomfort and a great lack of many necessities," to say nothing of the "peril from the tiger," which had been seen prowling around their camp on a number of occasions. If their affairs could not be attended to, it was imperative that they leave Arakan forthwith.

⁶⁴ For a colonial ethnographer's view of these hill peoples, see Lieut. T. Latter, "A Note on Some Hill Tribes on the Kuladyne River—Arracan," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 15 (1846): 60-78.

This letter, dated 31 January, brought a quick response, for they were told the next day that Thado had returned to Paragiri. Then, on 4 February, the Dutch party was taken in two *jalias* and carried first as far as a pagoda called "Chechemon," and then further down the river, to "den tempel der Bramensen." Thoroughly confused as to their whereabouts in the winding creeks and streams of the Kaladan, they spent that night in the boats, rather than on land. At sunrise the next day, some of the Dutch soldiers reported to Hensbroeck that just across a small intervening stretch of land they could see many large and small vessels, a good many of them decorated with flags and hangings, leading Hensbroeck to conclude that Thado and his retinue could not be far away. Eight *jalias* now approached them, richly decorated and carrying gilded standards and flags, and richly dressed oarsmen. The head of this little fleet informed Hensbroeck that he had two hours to ready himself for an audience with the king. The Dutch envoy was deeply embarrassed, for after several days outdoors and having spent the previous night in a *jalia*, his clothes and person were rather dishevelled and soiled (*verweert ende vervuylt*).

Indeed, Thado's purpose seems to have been largely to impress on the Dutch the contrast between his own power and their miserable condition. Rowed along in their vessels to the sound of music, the Dutch turned a bend in the creek and found themselves "in the middle of a very wide royal river [with] a countless many galliots of which several were rigged like ships in the Moorish manner, as also a great number of galleys lying at anchor, besides over 1500 *jalias* which we saw on either side along the shore, all full of well-armed soldiers carrying small iron and metal pieces." There were flags and standards fluttering everywhere, gilded "livery" in abundance, and some 4000 small boats (*prauwen*). The notables were all there in attendance with their wives, and on shore, armed soldiers were ranged for nearly two-and-a-half Dutch miles. A number of horsemen in the Persian style were to be seen, as well as elephants, some with gilded seats, and others ready for war. Hensbroeck estimated the entire gathering at the rather improbable number of 350,000 men, and suggests that the king's whole army and a good proportion of his other subjects must have been present. It was no wonder, writes the sour Dutchman, that the Dutch had been made to wait so long, for Thado had "needed that time to get together that much might." Moreover, he goes on to add: "I am of the opinion that His Majesty has done all of this, not so much to honour the Company, but principally on account of his

arrogance, and solely on account of his too-great reputation, to show us his power.”⁶⁵

We may seriously doubt whether this was entirely organised for the benefit of the Dutch, it being more probable that the Dutch arrived on the occasion of an existing river festival, formal hunt, or royal ceremony. In any event, having been rowed for a good length of time between the two lines of vessels, the Dutch were finally taken to the temporary royal residence, a large and well-decorated white tent atop one of the vessels, with pillars inside decorated with painted textiles, and carpets on the floor. The Dutch were required to take off their shoes, and made to follow the *rooyck*, prostrating themselves on the ground every few steps, until they arrived before Thado, himself on a gilded throne.

Having prostrated themselves once more on the ground, with clasped hands, the Dutch envoys were asked to stand up, and were presented to the king by the *rooyck*, who addressed Thado by crying out in Portuguese: “Sua Alteza” (*Souw Altesa*). Thado now addressed Hensbroeck and asked him what he wanted in Arakan; the latter replied somewhat insolently that the monarch would have read their intentions from the letter that Governor-General Van der Lijn had sent, but that if he wanted to hear it again orally, he could repeat it. Thado then asked if Hensbroeck had received no more “moderate and civil orders” than the demands in the letter, which he could hardly believe had been written by the governor-general. Rather, it seemed to him a conspiracy on the part of Van den Helm, well-known for his lies and inventions. A tirade against the former Dutch factor now followed, and Thado pointed out—amongst other things—that he had led a thoroughly disreputable life at Mrauk-U, consorting not with “honourable and respectable people, but continually associated with whores and riff-raff, on account of which he had undoubtedly consumed much of the resources of the Company.” He further noted that he knew that Van den Helm had not rendered proper accounts to the council at Batavia, and that he had invented debts which never existed. If some outstanding debts did exist, it was because of his sudden departure from Arakan. Thado went on, in the Dutch account, to complain bitterly against Van den Helm’s comportment in general. Indeed, he stated, even on his hasty departure, Van den Helm had reportedly carried off

⁶⁵ Compare the description of Thado’s court, and his hunting expeditions in Alaol, *Padmāvatī*, ed. Muhammad Shahidullah (Dhaka, 1950), 13-18; also the discussion of the same in Ghoshal, “Beginning of Secular Romance,” 67-68.

a large number of stolen slaves, and local women, despite royal orders to the contrary. Thado now addressed the issue of the yacht *Goeden Engel*. He stated (and this is somewhat at variance with Van den Helm's own letters) that whenever Van den Helm had been asked by Narapatigyi if the vessel was Dutch, he had answered in the negative, insisting it was Portuguese; therefore, the crew had been treated as enemies, and placed in the forest. However, on learning that they were Dutch, Thado, early in his reign, had handed some of them over to Van den Helm. Besides, they had not been badly treated; nor as claimed had their noses and ears been cut off. As for the money on board the ship, first of all it was an affair from his predecessor's reign; and second, the Dutch had seized one of his ships of Pulicat, so that the value of the two could be set off against each other.

Arguments and counter-arguments continued to be trotted out, but presently it became clear that there was an impasse, and silence; Thado then closed the gilded window behind which he sat, indicating the interview was at an end. The Dutch departed, and later that evening were taken back towards Arakan in two ordinary *jalias*. The rest of the court, too, seemed to be heading in that direction, and the armed forces had begun to disband by afternoon, "going hither and thither in great disorder," in Hensbroeck's uncomplimentary description. By late evening, the Dutch had passed the "city and fortress of Arraccan" (viz. Mrauk-U) in their boats, and came to a halt between Mrauk-U and the Bandel, near the residence of a certain "Assagry," and beyond that of Ugga (neither of whom apparently lived *intramuros*).

The next morning, 6 February, word came to the captains of the *jalias* that the Dutch should stay where they were and that bamboo huts should be made for them. Hensbroeck was not about to countenance this. He was feeling unwell, and insisted that he and his party be allowed to go at least as far as the Bandel. Besides, later that day, word came via the "priest" or "guide" (*den paep offle loots*), resident in the *badr maqâm* at Akyab, that reinforcements for the Dutch in the form of the galliot *Den Jager Pippy* had arrived off Uritaung. Hensbroeck therefore sent some men downriver to the vessels. It is only now that he mentions that some of the imprisoned Dutchmen had actually been released by Thado and were now in his charge. These men too were sent back to the ships. Finally, in the evening, the Dutch were asked for the list of debts and debtors, in order to translate it into Magh.⁶⁶

The next day, word came from the court that the king had ordered

⁶⁶ The interpreter, a certain Nicolau Rebelo ought not to be confounded with a

them to be lodged in “one of the most principal houses,” and that within a few days their old factory would be ready for them. Finally, on 10 February, the Dutch received permission to move to their old factory in the Bandel. But arriving there, a dismaying sight met their eyes. No lodge existed any more, only an open field with some coconut trees, under which the royal agent who was with them mockingly (*al spottende*) spread some carpets (*alcatyven*), assuring them that the nuts on the trees (which were planted by the Dutch) had been kept safe for them.

At last, the Dutch, convinced that the Arakanese were frightened of their seapower, decided despite the hostilities to release the *kotwâl*, who had been languishing as hostage throughout this period on board the Dutch ship. Matters appeared to have become slightly less tense, as firewood was arranged for the ship, and a sealed *farmân* arrived from the court, ordering the inhabitants of the Bandel to provide the Dutch their daily supplies. Feelers were also sent out from various parties to gauge the extent of Dutch claims. The Majlis sent word to the Dutch, asking whether they claimed 800 slaves, 23,660 *tangas*, or both, as outstanding from the time of Van den Helm. Both, he was told, and another 1150 *tangas* in debts besides. To which he sent word that in that event they would make little headway. On the 20th, Hensbroeck, hearing that the Majlis was at the wharf having repairs made to his ship, decided to pay him a visit. He was asked the same questions once more, and told the Majlis that the sum of over 23,000 *tangas* was on account of the money in the *Goeden Engel*. The claim of 800 slaves, on the other hand, was because of the atrocious treatment meted out to the crew. The Majlis after a short silence suggested that the Dutch might wish to reconsider. Though he was a friend of Van den Helm, he said, he had to state that the latter had invented many things, and lived it up with whores and the like. He had spent the Company’s money recklessly, a fact that had been noted not only by the Majlis but by a number of other persons. He was amazed that Van den Helm’s word carried so much credit in Batavia; if only he came back to Mrauk-U, it would soon be seen that a great part of the debts he claimed were *blauwe blommen* (that is, preposterous inventions), indeed that the debtors had never even existed. The Majlis also repeated the king’s accusation that Van den Helm, when first asked about the Dutch free-merchant’s yacht, had said that it was Portuguese. Naturally, the

“cousin” of one of the Arakan rulers, baptised by the Augustinians and given that name; cf. Marques Guedes, “D. Martim, um príncipe arracanês,” 79, n. 3.

crew had been dealt with accordingly. Besides, he said, the forest was not as bad as it was made out to be; the men had not been killed, and the idea that their noses and ears had been cut off was preposterous. And finally, he advised Hensbroeck that in future, while addressing the king, his tone ought to be more moderate and decent and the words chosen more considerately. The Dutch envoy assured him that without compromising his orders, he would assume a more modest tone in future.

At last, on the 22nd, word arrived that the king had, after consulting his astrologers and soothsayers, fixed the 27th of February for the next open court, which the Dutch could attend. The *kotwâl* and one of the *jalia* captains now arrived to inspect the Dutch present (2 large mirrors, 4 single red damasks, some paper with gold thread, balls of musk, rose water, and a few odds and ends) and, as had happened with Vasco da Gama in Calicut one hundred and fifty-two years earlier, judged them insufficient. But this was all the Dutch had brought, and so it was decided to divide it, two-thirds for the king and a third for the queen.

On the morning of the 27th, Hensbroeck and Van Rijk set out in the *kotwâl*'s boat, passing through the city of Mrauk-U, and after an hour's rowing arrived before the gate to the citadel. Here, after a wait of several hours, they were at last allowed in, and in a procession of fifty to sixty persons carrying the gift, passed through two doors, then through a great square courtyard with a large number of armed soldiers and some elephants. Once more obliged to prostrate themselves, the Dutch noted that they were rather better clad than on the earlier occasion, on the river. But the richer clothes were also heavier, and the wait in the sun had made them sweaty and uncomfortable; besides, their knees were unused to bending in the manner required by local ceremony. They now passed into a second courtyard, somewhat smaller than the first, also full of armed soldiers and eight extraordinarily striking elephants, which stood on either side of an audience hall at the far end of the courtyard. On their hands and knees, "all creeping," the Dutch were taken up four or five steps to the audience hall, which was a structure made of wood, mounted on pillars, open on all sides. Here, the courtiers sat on carpets and mats, arranged according to their importance; Thado himself and his queen (in the Dutch view, "his sister, whom he has taken as wife"), sat on a throne complex that was raised seven or eight feet higher than the others. The Dutch envoy salaamed three times as required, and Thado asked

what the Dutch planned to do, and when they intended to leave. Hensbroeck, as undiplomatic as ever, replied that now that they had missed the sailing season for Bengal due to the untoward delays in Arakan ("to our regret and the Company's great loss"), they would leave immediately for Pulicat. Thado now handed over a letter, in which he said he had replied point-by-point (*post tot post*) to the earlier missive from Batavia. Hensbroeck, whose tactlessness was irrepressible, then asked if Thado could tell him verbally what he had written in the letter; to which the king replied, in what was obviously a snub, that what he had to say was in the letter.⁶⁷ The king now asked how far Pulicat was from Mrauk-U, and on getting a response, summarily terminated the interview as usual by "pushing shut the door to his throne with his own hands." The Dutch party returned immediately to Mrauk-U, but were told by the *kotwâl* that they could not leave yet, as the royal permission for this was needed in writing. Increasingly impatient and uneasy, on 1 March Hensbroeck decided to go down-river and get on board his ship *Leeuwerk* anyway, leaving the skipper and his under-merchant on shore. The next day, however, those who remained on land in the Bandel found the watch around their house doubled to 600 men, and two well-armed war *jalias* blocking their access to the river. Hensbroeck's nervousness increased, and on the morning of the 3rd, he ordered those on land to pull out at once, even if they had to leave some of their goods behind. This was eventually accomplished with some hostilities on the river itself, in which various *jalias* were captured by the Dutch, and the "admiral of the patrolling *jalias* on the river" also wounded and taken prisoner by them.

The Dutch now began the cruise down to the mouth of the river, taking time off to attack settlements just off the Kaladan, particularly in the vicinity of Uritaung. At one stage, a fleet of fifty *jalias*, with drummers on them making a great noise, approached the two Dutch vessels but did not engage them. By 7 March, nearing the mouth of the river, Hensbroeck thought to put in at Mihur island, thinking that he could get hold of a cargo of slaves there. But the plan was abandoned for fear of getting into a fight on shore.

This failure does not seem to have discouraged the Dutch entirely. In 1651, Pieter Cocqu appears to have been sent on a cruise to see

⁶⁷ The letter is in fact largely an attack on Van den Helm and his comportment; for its text, see "Translaet missive door de Mayt: van Arraccan omrent den 27en Februarij anno 1650 geschreven in de moothse tale aen d'Ede. heer gouverneur generael ende d'heeren Raden van India," ARA, OBP, VOC. 1177, f. 154-55.

whether he could bring the Arakan rulers around by a show of force. Then, in October 1652, Governor-General Carel Reniersen sent out a more elaborate mission, with three vessels and the commissioner Joan Gossens, who appears to have been a rather more tactful personality than Hensbroeck. As Gossens himself put it in a letter to his counterpart in Bengal, the governor-general and council had decided to reopen the Arakan trade because the shortage of slaves was being felt rather severely in the Dutch Indies, and other sources of supply had more or less failed.⁶⁸ The Dutch were therefore willing to be far more flexible on this occasion than on the previous one; no preconditions were brought forth at the start of negotiations. Arriving with one yacht at the mouth of the Kaladan on 16 January 1653, the Dutch received the usual welcome from the *jalias*. On being told that the Dutch had a letter for Thado Mintara, they replied that the monarch had died some ten months earlier (i.e., in February-March 1652), and that his son Sandathudhamma ("Senda Sudromo Raza"), aged thirteen or fourteen, had succeeded him. This seemed an encouraging sign, especially since the Dutch were told that "while the dead [king] had ruled with punishments and rigorously, on the contrary this one, though he is still young, seemed to be much better, and was appreciated by the common man more and more with each passing day."⁶⁹ If he grew up, and did not fall under the influence of the villainous courtiers and notables, things actually looked rather promising from the Company's point of view. With this cheerful prospect, the Dutch waited patiently for an audience, once their two other vessels had arrived. They were eventually given two hostages, one the brother-in-law of the king's treasurer or *Sanghma* (a variant spelling of *Sachma*), the other a notable whom they called the *Segongry*. On 5 February, the Dutch party arrived by *jalia* in the Bandel (leaving their ships downriver), and on the 16th were granted an audience in the palace, where they went through roughly the same procedures as Hensbroeck and his party. Despite the opposition of some in the court, notably the *Sanghma*, and delicate negotiations on whether the Dutch ships would come upriver as far as the Bandel or not, the matter was more or less negotiated by late March.

⁶⁸ Gossens, Gerrit van Voorburgh, Gillis Cox and Michiel Willemsen, at Arakan, to Joan Verpoorten, Dutch commissioner in Bengal, 6 March 1653; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1200, f. 220-22v.

⁶⁹ Joan Gossens, Melaka, "Raport aen d'Ede Heer Carel Reniersen, Gouverneur-Generael ende d'E: Heeren Raaden van India . . .," 12 June 1653, f. 235-52 (citation on f. 236v), ARA, OBP, VOC. 1200.

Gossens resolved to leave David Verdonck and Gerrit van Voorburgh behind, once the rebuilding of the Company lodge had been decided upon. It was now a matter of seeking out appropriate export cargoes, rice, wax, and above all—slaves.

We may leave the Dutch then, as they were in early 1654, with their finger once more on the pulse of the slave trade in Arakan. Verdonck writes to Batavia, in January and March of that year, of how some old habits had been resumed by all the parties concerned. Gerrit van Voorburgh had now taken on the tasks once given to Pieter Cocqu; it was he who had been sent with an interpreter to Dianga and Chittagong, to explore the market there. A number of Portuguese, held prisoners in the earlier regime of Thado, had been released by Sandathudhamma, and sent out once more on slave-raids. A new regime had been put in place, where instead of a poll tax on imported slaves, the king claimed a share of the imported slaves themselves. The Dutch had managed, for their part, to pick up only a few healthy male slaves, having managed mostly “old women, infants and children,” due in part to competition from other buyers, such as the Muslim merchant Kamran Beg. The optimism at the time of Gossens’s visit had given way to a sourness, and rather familiar mentions of conflicts with tyrannous officials and notables.⁷⁰

Dutch trade in Arakan, after the interruption of the years 1647 to 1653, resumed, and continued at least till the mid 1660s, as well as intermittently thereafter. In 1656, Hendrik de Dieu succeeded Joan Gossens as *opperkoopman* at Arakan, and on his death two years later, the post was taken over by Gerrit van Voorburgh. Occasional slave cargoes ranging from 150 to 250 “heads” are reported in these years, but it is clear that the heyday of the Arakan slave trade had passed. This was brought home in a dramatic fashion in 1665, when the Dutch were actually forced by the Mughal *sūbadār* of Bengal, Shayista Khan, to choose between their presence in Bengal and in Arakan; they quite firmly chose the former.

The temporary withdrawal of the Dutch factory in Arakan in late 1665, accomplished with some stealth, has been discussed elsewhere by D. G. E. Hall, who has noted quite correctly that it resulted from a combination of several factors, amongst which deteriorating Mughal-Magh relations played a major role.⁷¹ The desperate raid mounted by

⁷⁰ David Verdonck at Arakan to Governor-General Johan Maetsuycker, 25 January and 1 March 1654; ARA, OBP, VOC. 1202, fls. 397-407, 408-14v.

⁷¹ Hall, “Studies in Dutch Relations,” 22-31.

Sandathudhamma's fleet on Bengal at the end of the monsoon in 1664, in order to take slaves and to force the Mughals on the defensive, proved counterproductive, helping to precipitate the eventual conquest of Chittagong by Shayista Khan's forces in 1666. Some years later, when the political temperature had calmed down somewhat, the Dutch Company, still hopeful of slave cargoes, reopened its Mrauk-U factory, but to no great success. Thus, once again, in the very last years of the long reign of Sandathudhamma, the VOC decided once more to pull out the bulk of its resources, as we see from a letter addressed to that monarch by Governor-General Cornelis Speelman on 20 September 1682.⁷² In this missive, the decision to reduce the factory to four junior members is communicated, as is the VOC's order to the *opperhoofd*, Dirck Vonck, and the bookkeeper, Coenraats, to return to Batavia with their families. The reason given was very simple: not native tyranny for once, but the fact that there were simply no slaves to be had anymore, and the Dutch hence had no motivation to stay on.⁷³ In turn, this was surely related once more to the Mughal capture of Chittagong, and the dispersal of a good part of the Arakan ruler's fleet early in the reign of Aurangzeb.⁷⁴ Rumours that arrived from Mrauk-U about the uncertain sanity of Sandathudhamma, that he had burnt down his own palace on the advice of astrologers in order to restore his failing health, could only have confirmed Batavia in this decision, even if later years brought other counsel.

Conclusion

This essay has been based largely on a seemingly “old-fashioned” method: closely following and dissecting the narrative grain of a set of early modern European sources from Asia. These are sources which—unless read with an ironical eye—implicitly present certain difficulties in reconstructing the ideological and ideational worlds of early modern Asian states. There is, for example, the vexed issue of what these sources call “tyranny,” which, while clearly linked to a larger construct of what

⁷² W. Fruin-Mees, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia, Anno 1682* (Batavia, 1931), 1113, 1127-29 (text of the letter).

⁷³ Cf. in this respect, the late seventeenth-century overview of Dutch activities by the Company's legal adviser: Pieter van Dam, *Beschrijvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie*, book 2, pt. 2, ed. F. W. Stapel (The Hague, 1932), 97-99.

⁷⁴ For a contemporary Persian account of the Mughal expeditions of the late 1650s and 1660s, see Shihab al-Din Talish, *Fathiyah-i 'Ibrīyah*, translated extracts in Jadunath Sarkar, *Studies in Aurangzeb's reign* (Calcutta, 1933), 163-213.

constitutes legitimate rulership, is also based on an evaluation of the nature and extent of state power.

From a highly theological viewpoint, as might have been adopted by some Jesuit, Augustinian, or Dominican missionaries based in early modern Asia, the legitimacy of *all* Asian rulers was open to question, save if they were converts to Christianity. Our major sources for this study are, however, not those of the Catholic missionary orders, but instead the letters and reports of the factors of the Dutch East India Company. With the Dutch factors, we enter a world that we might expect to be ordered somewhat differently than that of the Jesuit or Dominican. For were not the Dutch who traded in Asia first and foremost pragmatists, whose measure and touchstone was the market? If this were indeed true, we might expect a discussion framed in radically different terms, less moralising in tone and more concerned to get on with business as usual. If we start out with such an expectation, we may be in for something of a surprise. The reader who naïvely plumbs the copious documentation produced by the Dutch Company during its career may be left with the lasting impression that its Asian interlocutors were usually knaves and wretches when merchants, and tyrants when possessed of political power. The Company's servants, eloquent in their prose and free with their adjectives, spared practically no Asian monarch from their calumny, from the hapless little kings of eastern Indonesia, to the Mughals and the Safavid Shahs, who were rather better able to defend themselves, both literally and in terms of historiographical production. The congealed power of the mass of VOC documentation, and the seductively reasonable manner in which the Company's perspective is presented therein, have meant that few modern historians have sought to analyse what lay behind this persistent, hostile portrayal of nearly every Thai Phraklang or Telugu Nayaka. Some three decades ago, even nationalist Indian historians were willing to accept Dutch accounts of local "tyranny" at the Golconda court and in the ports along the Coromandel coast at face value, so persuasive did the Dutch factors seem.⁷⁵ Today, implicitly at least, most historians read these materials with a grain of salt, but still without a systematic alternative in mind. We have proposed a provisional interpretation here, namely that the Dutch Company suffered from a form of schizophrenia: between its official claims of being "mere traders,"

⁷⁵ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Jan Company in Coromandel, 1605-1690: A study in the inter-relationship of European commerce and indigenous economies* (The Hague, 1962).

and its concealed purpose of exercising moral and political (albeit not yet “colonial”) authority in Asia. This produced a shrill moralising discourse (made even more stark when it came to the slave trade), which, while drawing on earlier European stereotypes concerning Asian merchants and states, took matters a step further in the definition of a “moral distance” between Asians and (especially Protestant) Europeans. The very slave trade that was a key sign of the “tyranny” of the Arakan rulers was morally transformed in its signification when the slaves passed into the hands of the Dutch themselves.

Be that as it may, the Dutch materials are also an invaluable addition to what we know of the politico-economic history of Arakan in the seventeenth century, which is of course very largely derived from Manrique, and a few Arakanese chronicles on palm-leaf. D. G. E. Hall, in particular, had earlier in this century analysed a number of episodes in the political history of seventeenth-century Arakan through the testimony of published Dutch materials, notably the *Batavia Dagh-Register*; historians of the area had thus come to accept, in principle at least, that the Dutch sources might shed light on some aspects of Arakan’s history, in a period when the Portuguese narrative had wound down.⁷⁶ As briefly mentioned above, Manrique’s account, which deals with Arakan in the period of Thirithudhamma and his successor Narapatigyi, is also highly unreliable on a number of significant points.⁷⁷ Still, it is important in that it provides one of the rare contemporary descriptions of society in Mrauk-U, and that it also gives us a rather colourful portrayal of court and succession ceremonial. For an understanding of trade and politics though, it is defective; it does however confirm certain curious cultural details, such as that medical practitioners in the court included *tabibs*, practising a form of medicine akin to what was found in contemporary Indo-Persian courts.

It is of course true that, besides these European materials, we do have available to us copious literary materials, notably the writings in Bengali of the courtiers Daulat Qazi and Sayyid Alaol, as well as the uncomplimentary references in the Mughal chronicles that deal with Bengal in the epoch and which are necessarily concerned with the

⁷⁶ Hall, “Studies in Dutch Relations with Arakan.” Also see, more recently, the brief discussion in a paper by S. Arasaratnam, “Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century,” in K. S. Mathew, ed., *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi, 1995), 195-208.

⁷⁷ Silveira, ed., *Itinerário de Sebastião Manrique*; for a discussion, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Quisling or Cross-Cultural Broker,” 77-92.

Maghs. The Mughal state's ambiguous relationship with the Arakan rulers finds no better expression than in the odd episode of the Mughal prince, Shah Shuja', who, after being bested in the succession wars by his brother Aurangzeb, sought refuge with Sandathudhamma in the late 1650s, and was eventually killed with a large part of his retinue in Arakan on suspicions of harbouring excessive political ambitions in the early 1660s.⁷⁸ But the problem with our Bengali literary sources is that they do not provide even a partial (let alone a consistent) narrative, while the manuscript Arakanese chronicles cited by Collis and his collaborator San Shwe Bu have remained rather elusive to later, less intrepid (and less linguistically-competent) historians, like the present author.⁷⁹ Only recently have the archaeological and art-historical researches of Catherine Raymond drawn our attention to important compilations of sources by Burmese scholars, as well as material remains from the period under consideration: their exploration remains a desideratum.⁸⁰

In view of all this, what can we hazard concerning the articulation of trade and royal power in mid-seventeenth century Arakan? We have before us a number of standard models of royal power elaborated from other neighbouring contexts, which we might briefly survey with an eye to our materials. These fall into several overlapping groups. The first are the "segmentary state" and "galactic polity" models, which suggest extensive claims of sovereignty, based paradoxically on very weakly articulated coercive systems. Hierarchies of state authority exist in this view, but primarily as a consequence of preconceived and stable cultural constructs of how states *should* be. Reference is naturally made to notions of "universal" sovereignty, based on Buddhist or Hindu cosmology, that state ideologues use to determine the language of inscriptions, coinage, and even chronicles (where these exist). Faced

⁷⁸ For a detailed discussion, see M. Siddiq Khan, "The Tragedy of Mrauk-U (1660-1661)," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 11/2 (1966): 195-254.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of sources for Burmese history (but largely focusing on the Irrawaddy and Salween valleys), see Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, Appendix. Also see Pe Maung Tin, "The Burma Manuscripts in the British Museum," *JBRSP* 14/3 (1924): 221-46. The main chronicles used by San Shwe Bu (from palm-leaf manuscripts in his possession) appear to be Doewa's *Rakhaing Razawingyi*, the *Dinriyawaddi Aredawpon*, and the *Nga Lat Rone Razawin* (the last for the mid-seventeenth century).

⁸⁰ For a useful survey, focused on Arakan itself, see Catherine Raymond, "Etudes des relations religieuses entre le Sri Lanka et l'Arakan du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle: documentation historique et évidences archéologiques," *Journal Asiatique* 283/2 (1995): 469-501. Raymond cites among other references the five-volume collective work, published in Sittwe (Myanmar) in 1988, and titled *Rakhaing-prene Phritsaing Thamaing Hmâ*.

with such states, the task of the anthropologist-historian is to dismantle the apparent grandeur of sovereign claims to reveal a small, relatively weak (and usually agrarian) core, and extensive peripheral domains over which little or no effective and continuous authority is in fact exercised. In the case of Mrauk-U, a possible approach would be to focus on the royal cult of Mahamuni, the great stone Buddha image at Paragiri, around which a ritual of pilgrimage was organised. A further unresolved question is how one can build into such models the possibility that a monarchy can change its character over time.

A rather more regionally grounded model than the one referred to above is the “Malay Sultanate” model, based on a combination of trade (often conspicuously absent in the formulation discussed above), and limited agrarian tributes.⁸¹ Elements in this model would normally include a limited agrarian “aristocracy” (*hulubalang* when rural-based, or *priyayi* when more court-centred), and above all a set of *arriviste* “magnates” (*orang kaya*), whose role it is to contest royal claims over trade. The Sultan struggles, in this view, to arrive at a consensus (*mufakat*) in relation to these differing pulls; the three principal ministers, the *tumenggung* (responsible for civic order), the *laksamana* (or admiral), and the *bendahara* (or treasurer) may either aid or hinder him, in differing political situations. Drawn using elements from the Sultanates of Aceh, Johor, Kedah, etc. (in at least some of which palace slaves and eunuchs also had a role to play), the terminology in this model as it stands is obviously Malay, and it is unclear, *a priori*, whether its applicability might extend outside the Malay-speaking area. There seems to be an implicit emphasis on Islam (thus, the “Sultanate”) as opposed to Buddhist-Hindu notions of *mandala* and *chakravartin*, prominent in the segmentary-galactic formulation. One should not, of course, be so naïve as to imagine that aspects of the “Sultanate” cannot be found in ostensibly Theravada Buddhist states or the other way around.

Finally, we have models of royal “absolutism,” as have been applied intermittently to some of the Malay Sultanates (Aceh, Johor), to Thailand under the Prasat Thong dynasty in Ayuthia, or to some of the rulers of the Toungoo dynasty in lower Burma.⁸² In this interpretation, emphasis

⁸¹ For an exposition, see Denys Lombard, “Le sultanat malais comme modèle socio-économique,” in *Marchands et hommes d’affaires asiatiques dans l’Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine, 13^e-20^e siècles*, ed. Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin (Paris, 1988), 117-24.

⁸² Cf. Anthony Reid, “Trade and State Power in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Southeast Asia,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh IAHA Conference, Bangkok, August 1977* (Bangkok, 1979), 391-419.

is laid on the personal and autocratic power of the ruler, on the relatively high degree of centralisation within the elite, on conflicts between the claims to resources made by the rulers and by religious elites, and (very occasionally) on the production of royally patronised texts which mark new heights in the claims made by royal authority.

Let us note that the morphological distance between these models, while it exists, is not all that great. All of them seem to agree on a vision of states that did not see their authority as cadastral, that is, as defined in terms of the enumeration of a subject population and its subdivisions, the measurement of productive resources, in brief the type of activities that become a normal part of statecraft in Ming and Ch'ing China, Tokugawa Japan, in the Mughal, Maratha and other domains of eighteenth-century peninsular India, or for that matter in the Ottoman empire. The states that are characterised as "segmentary" would not be expected to produce systematic fiscal or other records, but it is of some importance that even the notion of "absolutism" as applied to, say, Indonesia or lower Burma seems to rest on a basis other than that of the centralisation of agrarian fiscal authority.

Our portrayal of the Mrauk-U kingdom shares some significant structural elements with each of the models set out above, but also sits somewhat askew of them. This is partly because, rather than engaging in a purely structural analysis of the constituent elements that made up the Mrauk-U state, we have paid particular attention to its *evolution* over time, and to its openness to external influence. Hence we return, in fine, to the major theme of this paper: the relationship between the state-building of the Mrauk-U rulers, and their image in the eyes of others. Operating out of a geographically limited territory, and above all through the control of a river system and its resources, the Mrauk-U state surely has a distinctly "Southeast Asian" flavour to it, suggesting tempting comparisons with, say, the Sumatran states of Jambi and Palembang.⁸³ But the comportment of its rulers was influenced as much from the west as from the east, and as the "Lords of the Golden House" (possibly a metaphor for the *axis mundi*, Mount Meru), as well as of the White and Red Elephants, the Arakan rulers saw themselves undoubtedly as holding the balance between the world of Theravada Buddhism, and that of Indo-Persian state-building in the

⁸³ It does not quite conform, however, to the well-known models of upstream-downstream (*ulu-ilir*) opposition, as developed in Barbara W. Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu, 1993); and Jane Drakard, *A Malay Frontier: Unity and Duality in a Sumatran Kingdom* (New York, 1990).

style of the Mughals or the Sultanate of Golconda. The persistent complaints of the Dutch reflect the fact that several of these rulers, rather like Shah 'Abbas in Iran, or Shahjahan in Mughal India, kept a very sharp "mercantilist" eye on the comportment of traders. To the factors of the VOC, it appeared obvious that Thado Mintara, arguably the most assertive and centralising of these rulers, was hence also the greatest "tyrant;" and tyranny here came to mean little more than resistance to the designs of the Honourable Company.